Women re-entry students: an investigation into changes in their self-esteem

Thesis

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Women re-entry students:

An investigation into changes

in their self-esteem

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Abstract

Successive governments' desire for greater numbers of school leavers in Higher Education (HE) has been realised, with an unexpected rise in recent years in the number of mature or non-traditional student entrants in tertiary education. Women in particular have featured highly in this re-entry surge, especially to part-time learning or to the non-conventional, distance learning mode of study. At the same time, researchers in the field of education have begun to widen their understanding of the different experiences and needs of this unorthodox and heterogeneous student population, in order to help retain such students and offer advice regarding the further expansion of provision to this sector of the population.

The aim of the current research is to investigate the personal rather than the academic benefits experienced by women re-entering education following a break of some years, and especially with regard to changes in self-perception and self-esteem. These latter concepts are indeed nebulous and both difficult to define and measure. This thesis examines different methodologies for investigating these entities, namely a Self Esteem Inventory, a Q sort, an Ideal Self Inventory and an Interview technique. The women students investigated in this thesis were all returning to education.

Data from the main study implicated significant others and goal orientations in the shaping of women's perceptions of self. They suggested that what had been observed in these re-entry students was the phenomenon of unpremeditated personal growth. An important finding was that positive personal benefits were experienced even by those students who withdrew part-way through their course of study. These have implications for the effective design of induction and other courses to suit the especial requirements of the non-traditional woman student.

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1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

The focus of this research is to understand the perceptions of women students who return to part-time study. More specifically, it concerns the changes to self-esteem that occurred in a group of women without the academic qualifications to enter traditional university who embarked on a degree course with the Open University (OU) in 2001 in the East Anglia Region. The interest in this work arose from the researcher's own experiences as a re-entry student and from discussions with other non-traditional undergraduates.

Until recently, access to university has been restricted to the elite minority who had received an academic secondary education and who were disproportionately drawn from the middle and upper social strata (Woodward, 2000). However, a renewed emphasis over the last decade on the national importance of investment in education has led to the broadening of educational prospects, with the promotion of equal opportunities a major objective for some British universities and colleges (Hyde and Kling, 2001). Mature, women and part-time students have traditionally been under-represented in Higher Education (HE), but new initiatives have meant that registrations by non-traditional students have increased compared to those by traditional students (Carney-Crompton, 2002). Indeed, 30% of first degree entrants in 2000/01 were aged over 21 (HESA, 2002); the majority of such re-entry students are female (Carney-Crompton, *ibid*). At the institutional level, understanding and accommodating the situational and dispositional needs of such students is important in order for HE to survive. However, at the personal level, better academic accomplishments are coupled with higher self-esteem for non-traditional women students (Hyde, *ibid*). This issue of self-esteem is crucial, because it is an integral part of personal wellbeing and a pre-

requisite for educational achievement; the construct of self-esteem is recognized 'to be a major factor in learning outcomes' (Lawrence, 2000, pxiii). It is this aspect, of women's personal health, which this research aims to address.

Women re-entry students do not compose a heterogeneous group, and it is difficult to make generalizations about their experiences. Nonetheless, re-entry students' passage within HE can be characterized by barriers to be overcome, knowledge to be acquired and adjustments to be made. Entering HE as a mature woman means coping with a period of change that has psychological consequences (Johnson and Robson, 1999). Women students are products of their history and of their psychology; parallel to the academic journey runs one of personal discovery. It is this underlying theme of personal identity that is of interest, not least to education providers but also to many students themselves. How do mature women students maintain, manage and develop their sense of self during what can be a life-changing experience?

However, self-perception and self-esteem are complex psychological constructs, difficult to define and challenging to assess (Pals, 1999). In order to research this topic, 'self-esteem', its antecedents and related issues have firstly to be unpacked. In addition, women returners are themselves a heterogeneous group, and an overview of their composition adds to the understanding of the backgrounds and motivations of and the outcomes for these particular students.

1.2 The purpose of this thesis

This thesis offers a way of understanding the changing self-perceptions of one group of women part-time students. It provides an assessment of various ways of appraising levels of self-perception and self-esteem. It suggests that the role of significant others in this evaluation process, although central within the literature on self-esteem, has been overlooked in empirical studies. This research seeks to redress

that balance. Furthermore, the thesis indicates that, though in a state of flux, women begin to flourish when coping with the multiple demands on their personal resources that being a re-entry student entails. Although concurring with other studies that self-esteem may increase over a course of study, this research proposes that what altered was a fundamentally different element of the women's personae. As a result of re-entering education, some women experienced a transformation in the most basic way they viewed themselves.

The aims in this research of examining the shifting self-perceptions of women re-entry students were twofold. Firstly, as stated above, it was to attempt to clarify the role of significant others in perceptions of self. Secondly, it was also to identify the impact of motivational style on self-esteem (Dykman, 1998; Dweck, 2000), from the perspective of the female adult student. With knowledge about the way women students are affected by those closest to them and by their own orientations to study, providers can tailor their course materials and teaching strategies to ensure that the learning experience for this expanding group of students is as positive as possible.

The research was designed to address three main questions:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

Following the *Introduction* and origins of this research in Chapter 1, the first part of Chapter 2, *The re-entry student and self-concept,* presents a profile of non-

traditional students, together with a number of barriers to returning to education which they may face. The chapter summarises studies that point to the different coping mechanisms which adult students adopt.

Are these mechanisms or personal resources related to notions of self or of self-esteem? Returning to education appears to impact on perceptions of self, and the second part of Chapter 2 highlights the history of self-concept research and theories that are relevant to this notion within the context of adults and HE. The research questions are also restated here.

Chapter 3, *Methodology,* explains the methodology used in this research. It explores the different options available for investigating students' sense of self, and explains the research tools actually used. These were Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Battle, 1986), a Q Sort (Stephenson, 1953), and an Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) (Norton, Morgan and Thomas, 1995).

Chapter 4, *The Pilot Study,* covers the preliminary investigation carried out to test the efficacy of the above research instruments. It suggests that, despite the focus being a disparate group of mature women students, it is feasible to investigate changing notions of self-perception with these research instruments. However, the results from this pilot investigation also highlighted the need when investigating this topic for qualitative data of the sort generated by an interview. The data suggested that self-concept is modified over the duration of a course of study, but that a multi-faceted approach is required to probe more deeply into what such changes may be attributable to.

In Chapter 5, *Open University study in the context of women's lives,* the situational and educational backgrounds of the participants for the main part of the investigation are covered. This chapter suggests that the women who took part in this

research are typical of OU and distance-learning (DL) students, and as such, the results of the study may not be unique to this group but may be generalisable to a wider DL student population.

The following four chapters, 6, 7, 8 and 9 present the results from the SEI, Q sort, ISI and interviews, respectively. Each chapter gives the raw data and offers an interpretation of the findings. Chapter 6 illustrates that the *SEI* was a useful tool for hypothesis testing, was quick and easy to use and gave a quantitative indication of fluctuations in self-esteem. It was valuable for accessing notions of academic self-esteem. The *Q sort*, in Chapter 7, was a more complex and demanding research tool, allowing both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results from this instrument, whilst based on individualistic responses, also indicated group trends. A particular strength of this instrument was that it was more user-centred, placing the participants themselves in charge of the classification process.

Chapter 8, the *ISI,* addresses the importance of using participants' own words when investigating such a personal notion as self-esteem. This research instrument uncovered the relevance to the participants of the notion of 'confidence'. Crucially, however, it also indicated how difficult participants found articulating their thoughts about themselves. From Chapter 9, the *Interviews,* it becomes apparent that the participants were, however, able to rationalise their reasons for studying, to reflect on and relish their changes in self and recognise the role played by significant others in that regeneration.

The *Conclusion,* Chapter 10, summarises the achievements and findings of the thesis and indicates their implications. It compares the merits of the various research instruments and suggests areas worthy of further research and analysis. The conclusion is that self-esteem in the context of returning to education is a complex topic, its

interwoven strands making a less than clear-cut investigation. However, the findings are that re-entering education may bring about an increase in self-esteem, implicated in which are the role played by significant others and goal orientations. An important discovery is that the battery of tools employed in this research inadvertently but serendipitously uncovered an aspect pertinent to self-esteem that hitherto has been overlooked – that of personal growth. This has implications for the way in which self-esteem is defined and researched. What may have been witnessed in this investigation is that embarking on higher education is an enterprise from which women re-entry students may gain substantially, and on a very personal level.

2: The re-entry student and self-concept

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the scene with respect to non-traditional or re-entry students, giving the background to the current study. Its purpose is to review previous research and identify an area worthy of further investigation. This research is interested in women re-entry students and the impact that returning to education has on their perceptions of self.

The chapter first highlights the barriers re-entry students face, and indicates the particular resources they may need in order to persist with their course. The special concerns of women re-entry students are highlighted. However, previous research often disguises the issue that returning to learning can have a profound impact on re-entry students' personal identity or self-concept. Secondly, the chapter reviews the literature on self-concept research, and points out the implications of returning to education for personal identity. The discussion here features research that highlights the benefits of distance education (DE) for re-entry women students.

Finally, the chapter summarises previous findings, and formalizes the research questions pertinent to this thesis. First, however, an exploration of the term 're-entry student' will be undertaken, and benefits to the adult of returning to education briefly outlined.

2.2 Profile of adult students

Successive governments' desire for greater numbers of students in Higher Education (HE) has been realized, including a considerable increase in recent years in the number of re-entry or non-traditional student entrants (Beinart and Smith, 1997).

Indeed, since its election in May 1997, the Labour Government has rapidly developed its lifelong learning policy, with the fields of post-compulsory and continuing education expanding and becoming less marginal (Taylor and Watson, 1998). As the student profile has become more 'mature', more women have entered HE in Britain, outnumbering men for the first time in 1996/7 (Whaley, 2000). According to the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), 22% of adults surveyed in Britain in 1999 said they were 'currently learning' (Sargant, Field, Francis, Schuller and Tuckett, 2000, piv). (This study, however, did not indicate what was meant by 'learning'. Indeed this term is a contentious one, with meaning shifting across different discourse arenas (Holmes, 2002).) A further 17% said they had been learning in the past three years. More men than women were learning (24% and 21% respectively) in 1999; this gender difference is also seen in that significantly more women than men (40% to 34%) said they had not been involved in learning since leaving full-time education.

Patterns of learning change across the life-cycle, but according to Sargant *et al* (2000) vocational, professional and work-related studies dominate the subjects adults follow. The popularity of computer studies has increased, relative to NIACE's 1980 survey, and is no longer taken predominantly by men. Almost half of their respondents (47%) in 1999 gave a work-related reason for choosing their course of study.

Harrison (1993) defines 'mature' students as all those who do not follow the traditional route to university through 'the acquisition, in a sixth form, of the required number of A levels at the age of 18'. The typical adult learner is 'white, middle class and well-educated' (Grill, 1999). It is presumed that the numbers of re-entry students will increase in the future, with a particular impetus for women students. However, returners to education are not a homogenous group. Re-entry students' backgrounds, motivations and needs within the education context are many and varied, as a review of the literature shows.

Governments and the general population alike hold the belief that education is important for the economic well being of society (McFadden, 1995), but what benefits does returning to study have for the adult? Regardless of previous educational and social disadvantages, adults often see higher education as a route to a 'better' life. In economic terms, re-entry students have found longer-term benefits in the form of promotion or securing more financially or emotionally rewarding jobs, or being able to embark on a more satisfying career (Adnett and Coates, 2000; Egerton, 2001). This is especially the case when there is a close connection between degree course and a particular career:

> *Doors have been opened as a result of my degree (engineering). I have already had two promotions.* (Smithers and Griffin, 1986, p135)

Other research has shown that the benefits extend beyond the individual. Edwards (1993) reports on the impact on the family of a mother who is a student:

> *The women spoke of how they felt their children had become much better informed because of the discussions [they had with them about issues and events encountered at university], and mentioned that it might also have some effects upon their children's current and/or future education.* (p120)

In some cases, one parent studying has encouraged another in the household to gain more qualifications. Morgan (1991) also found that students reported gains other than economic ones from returning to study, in terms of self-development. This was the case at least for those with vocational or intrinsic orientations to study. Some students, for example, talked about:

> *A new awareness and seeing themselves and things differently.* (p86)

However, interest in or concern over re-entry students has not been restricted to their volume, to gender differences or to the perceived benefits of re-entering education (e.g. Burge, 1998; Aldridge and Lavender, 2000; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000). These issues have, however, featured heavily in the government's account of its success in encouraging a more highly qualified population. Widening participation is not the end of the problem; re-entry students are genuinely faced with difficulties when they return to learning, over and above being accepted on a programme of study in the first place. Re-entry students cannot simply be slotted into a system not properly ready or prepared for them. Throughout the last decades there has been a number of studies charting all aspects of the re-entry student experience (Rockhill, 1982; Blaxter and Tight, 1994; Bird, 2000). Because they have previously been under-represented in both academia and in research, women re-entry students in HE have become a particular focus of attention. Some experiences are common to all, whether they are traditional or re-entry students, but the growing number of women returners to education, and the particular circumstances they face, mean their experiences merit research and documentation. Whilst some studies have analysed students' demographic features and success rates, others have looked at the barriers re-entry students must overcome when returning to study. This is an area particularly worthy of attention since there is little prospect for them if the obstacles for would-be students are insurmountable. The following section considers some of these barriers, and aims to understand the climate non-traditional students face when returning to education.

2.3 Barriers to study

Gaining a degree as a non-traditional student is a considerable achievement; taking those first steps and enrolling on a course is equally no mean feat. There are

many obstacles that adults must overcome in order just to become a student; Ekstrom provides a three-dimensional framework with which to consider this. He categorized these barriers as situational, dispositional and institutional (Ekstrom, 1972). Tight (1993) added the barrier of previous educational experiences to this list. However, a further issue to be discussed is that of the financial implications for adults of returning to education.

The selection of studies that follows has been chosen to examine these issues. The first section considers the most pertinent of these barriers for women re-entry students, that of situational constraints. Tied up with this are role overload – having too many conflicting demands on time – and role contagion, situations not uncommon to the woman re-entry student. In addition, women may be predisposed to self-depreciation and the need to justify themselves, which perhaps act as a brake on aspirations to return to education; these dispositional aspects are then considered. Such intrinsic barriers operate in tandem with extrinsic ones, and obstacles thrown up by external agencies may also have to be overcome. This section also discusses the barriers that re-entry students may face at the institutional level, before giving consideration to financial concerns. It starts, however, by reflecting on the domestic situation many women students find themselves in.

2.3.1 Situational barriers

Within Ekstrom's situational barriers are those of familial, sociological, financial, residential and personal factors. The first of these is important, especially when considering women re-entry students. Whilst returning to education may confer a certain amount of status or identity (Edwards, 1996), for many women studying must take second place to running the home and family. Despite the more enlightened times we live in, the domestic burden is still more heavily placed on women.

According to Garner (1990), 'husbands and children make home life as minimally conducive to studying as possible'. This implies that women students with husbands and children may have an exceptionally difficult time in dovetailing conflicting demands of home and study, although 'strong support' (Home, 1988) is a mitigating factor. In his study of the problems and external pressures experienced by adults in education, Woodley, Wagner, Slowley, Hamilton and Fulton (1987) found that 49% of women students gave family demands as a slight or great problem. Women's dual roles and how the needs of their families impinge on studying are demonstrated in Chapter 5 of this thesis. In Woodley's study, course choice for many women depended on how it fitted in with domestic responsibilities:

> *I get my husband up at five so I get up at five and I study before [the children] get up...* (Heron, 1997, p62)

Studying often has a polarising effect on students' domestic lives, because studying is constrained by the prevailing social and cultural expectations. One theme emerging from interviews into re-entry women students' experiences is that of 'education without consent' (Morgan, 1991). Some women students receive no support from their families, and in extreme cases, studying must be carried out in secret:

> *I didn't do it in the evening when he was around.* (Heron, 1997, p63)

This means that in order to embark on studying, women must first consider how they will fit it in to a schedule where domestic responsibilities take precedence, and where there may be little in the way of practical support from husbands or partners. Coser (1974) coined the term 'greedy institution' for those establishments which seek exclusive and undivided loyalty from those associated with it. This term has also been applied to the family and more recently, and pertinently, to educational establishments

(Acker, 1980). Women students, then, experience conflict in their allegiances. Home's study (1998) with triple role women (those women students who have family commitments as well as paid work responsibilities) has demonstrated that perceived intensity of student demands predicted role conflict, overload and contagion (thoughts of one role interfering whilst attempting to carry out another). This concept of role contagion is considered next.

However women students prioritise their time, they often do not feel at ease with their decision. In her study, Edwards (1993) found that women wanted to fulfill the commitments generated by the family and by education, to the full, because both were so important to them:

> *I just think I'd like to have been able to do both, you know, at the same time. Devote my whole life to college and somehow have this other person looking after my child the whole time.* (p66)

Edwards' study highlights the problems women have with the overlap of their responsibilities. She found that none of the participants in her research could keep out the domestic side of their lives when in the academic environment:

> *...the first time I'd actually left them by themselves with someone else...I just couldn't think...* (Edwards, 1993, p66)

Similarly, the women found it difficult to switch off from education when at home:

> *I went to sleep thinking about things, particularly essays, and woke up in the middle of the night thinking about them...*

In contrast to jobs with fixed hours and tasks, women students often find that family and student work 'just never end' (Home, 1998). Home suggests that often

women initially have unrealistic expectations of what extra demands will be placed on them by returning to study. This was particularly the case in her research, where the women participants all had children and full-time jobs as well as being students (triple role women).

Looking at what might reduce role conflict, overload and contagion, Home found that distance education (DE) was the only university 'support' to reduce vulnerability to these factors. Flexible time frames allowed students to put academic work aside when family crises erupted. She suggested that lower vulnerability to contagion within the DE environment might be due to lack of contact with other students. Not hearing others' concerns about lack of progress meant there was less of a reminder of or pressure regarding work not done. The relevance to women of DE is further examined in section 2.10. The participants for the main part of the current research were distance learners with The Open University; its model of distance education is considered in Chapter 5.

One way of coping with these demands is to acquire an effective time-management strategy. This is considered further in section 2.4.3. Redding and Dowling's rites of passage (1992) suggest rituals which served to bridge the gap between the different aspects of these women's lives. These rituals included the negotiation of the admissions process, successful completion of course components and the receipt of adequate grades for assignments. A related issue to that of familial or situational constraints is that of disposition. When it comes to putting barriers in the way of returning to or staying in education, women may provide the greatest hindrance themselves, in their attitude or views regarding their eligibility or capability to study. Such dispositional aspects are considered next.

2.3.2 Dispositional barriers

Dispositional barriers to study include personality, motivation, and attitudes (Ekstrom, 1972). For many women, returning to education is seen as an individualistic or abstract thing to do. Several women in Edwards' study said they felt they were being 'selfish' or 'indulgent' in requiring and making space for so much time in which to study (Edwards, 1993). Consequently, returning to education has to be justified. Ambitions are often seen as selfish; domestic responsibilities and children take precedence:

> *...you have your [college] work to do but the time you spend with him [her son], you know, is just as important...*(p67)

Whaley (2000) identified 'limited aspirations and expectations' as a component part of dispositional barriers. She also reported that attitudes of family, friends and society shaped and restricted women's hopes. The views of significant others are particularly influential when women consider returning to education. Mixed messages – such as the Government's encouragement one week to women to return to employment (or study), followed the next week by a report 'showing' that latchkey children underachieve in school – can further erode any confidence women may have about the value of gaining further academic qualifications. The need to weigh up the pros and cons of returning to education may act as a brake on taking those initial steps.

Experiences within both the public and private spheres may also feed into dispositional barriers to re-entering education. Women's limited success in the labour market, and the low status accorded to full-time motherhood, may result in women developing low self-esteem and highly ambivalent attitudes towards their own abilities. In the educational context, this could be manifested by women taking a lower level course than they are capable of; opting for distance education (where there is less overt

comparison between students); or by not returning to study at all. Having inconsistent definitions of their abilities, women are often caught between conflicting sets of expectations and sanctions. These were often first encountered in compulsory schooling, where academic success was expected and rewarded, but is not reflected in women's level of representation in the most powerful positions in society.

Women's own views on themselves may then combine with societal expectations to suggest that returning to study cannot be fitted in alongside their primary role as caretaker. Along with situational barriers, women's own dispositions may serve to dampen the impetus to re-enter education. However, even when women do consider it a step worth or necessary to take, getting on to a course of study can itself be a major hurdle. Ekstrom suggests that barriers unwittingly raised by educational institutions are no easier to overcome. The next section considers this.

2.3.3 Institutional barriers

Some of the institutional problems defined by Ekstrom are being accepted on to a programme of study in the first place together with financial aid practices, insufficient student personnel services and deficiencies in curriculum planning. Admission practices, such as sex and age targets, may mean limited places are available for women returnees, although this would seem to contradict widening participation policies (HEFCE, 1996; McGivney, 2001). The overarching institutional difficulty, however, is that non-traditional students often must fit a system designed for 'compliant and predictable' 18 year olds (Tight, 1993). Frequently, there is little concession made for re-entry students' needs. The focus instead is on the providers' 'wants' and values (Titmus, 1993); and women students' situational factors, which may encompass other roles, such as primary carer for family members, are overlooked. Issues such as location, timetabling or the composition and delivery of courses are frequently geared

towards traditional (i.e. 18-21 year old) students, ignoring the fact that 70% of students aged over 25 studies part-time.

Clearly, there is a link between participating in education in later life and would-be students' *current* situations, in terms of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. However, another aspect which impinges is their *previous* educational experience. The next section considers such educational factors.

Adults' past experience of school and learning can have a major impact on their subsequent participation in education. Many adults carry with them the memory of the low expectations their teachers had had of them (Edwards, 1993), or their unsuitability for further education (Thompson, 1983). This impacts on some women's willingness to re-enter education, as they do not wish to relive the ignominy of lack of success. Hull's study (2000) confirmed that many adults returning to education felt they had been branded 'failures' during their compulsory schooling, although their current experience of studying contrasted pleasantly with their initial education.

The experience of compulsory schooling has implications for participation in lifelong learning: according to Sargant *et al* (2000), the length of initial education continues to be the 'clearest forward indicator' of participation in adult learning (pv). This survey concludes that the more initial education and training people receive, the greater the likelihood of their participating in learning later on. Other studies have shown that adult education of all kinds recruits disproportionately those who have already had some experience of educational success (Woodley *et al*, 1987), and attracts mostly middle and lower middle classes who were successful at school (Thompson, 1983). This is borne out by more recent statistics. Sargant *et al*'s study for NIACE (2000), for example, states that 'socio-economic class continues to be a key to understanding the learning divide' (pv). In this survey, over half of all upper and middle-class respondents were current or recent learners, compared with one third of the

skilled working class and one quarter of unskilled working class people and people on limited incomes.

A related aspect to that of quality of school experience, relevant to the discussion about participation in education as an adult, is quality and quantity of success in public examinations. The following definitions related to qualifications are given in Appendix 3 of *The Open University's Widening Participation Strategy 2001-2004*:

Low	No formal qualifications, CSE other than grade 1, RSA or school leaving certificate
Lowish	CSE grade 1, GCE O level, SCE O grade, GCSE, BEC general certificate/ diploma, professional qualification below A level, 1 GCE A level, SCE H grade, higher school certificate in 1 subject

As indicated above, those with few or low formal qualifications are less likely to participate in education as an adult. Woodley's survey (1993) of Open University (OU) students with low entry qualifications revealed that these students still regarded their experience with the OU as a positive one, even if they did not complete the course they had enrolled on. Nonetheless, it remains that:

> *The most universally important factor [to influence participation in further education by adults] is schooling.* (Houle, 1961)

This is supported by other studies: 71% of the respondents in the NIACE survey (2000) held educational qualifications, with 85% of those who worked full-time and 75% of those employed part-time having formal qualifications. The percentage of unemployed people and those not working who had qualifications dropped to 68% and 62% respectively. However, it is not clear from this the proportions of those with qualifications who were engaged in some form of studying; the implication is that the lower qualified people were less likely to participate.

Recent experiences of learning exert a powerful influence on whether adults expect to study in the future. This is confirmed by Woodley's (*ibid*) and Hull's (1995) research where the positive experiences of re-entry students overrode their recollections of negative schooldays, and encouraged them to stay in the learning system. In contrast, 87% of people in the NIACE survey (Sargant *et al*, 2000) who had done no learning since completing full-time education said they were unlikely to participate in learning in the future.

One impetus for women to gain more academic qualifications is the enhanced employment and economic prospects they may bring (Egerton, 2001; Woodley, 2001). However, such long-term gains may be at the expense of short-term financial hardship. Ekstrom included financial barriers within his three-tier framework (under situational barriers), but recent developments in this area make this issue worthy of closer examination. The following section looks at the financial implications for non-traditional students of returning to education.

2.3.4 Financial barriers

The erosion and final withdrawal of student grants, and the introduction of student loans and tuition fees means financial difficulties may be more pronounced for all types of student than a decade ago. In 1987, Woodley stated that 25% of qualifying students experienced some problem in meeting the costs of their studies (Woodley *et al*, 1987). More recent figures indicate that students are leaving university with an average debt of £10,000 per student (O'Reilly and Elliot, 2002). Although overall participation in HE since the introduction of tuition fees and student loans has been unaffected, applications from non-traditional students have fallen considerably (Adnett *et al*, 2000). Re-entry students may indeed be worse off than younger students in this respect; many

leave paid employment in order to study, and may have additional financial responsibilities in the form of dependents.

Finance is the most important barrier to younger adults participating in learning (Sargant *et al*, 2000). In their 1999 survey, Sargant *et al* found that 11% of respondents cited 'cost/money' as a reason for not participating in learning. 13% of women in that research cited childcare or care for other dependents as an obstacle to returning to education. The issue of childcare, however, highlights an aspect of returning to study that, for students who have dependent children, links three barriers – situational, because the role as caregiver must be fulfilled; institutional, because suitable childcare provision must be available; and financial, because it must be affordable.

Despite the low percentage of students reporting concerns regarding childcare costs, the general lack of good, and accessible, childcare is still an important barrier to the participation of mothers in education. This is an issue that concerns parents of school-aged as well as of pre-school children. NIACE's report (Sargant *et al*, 2000) states that childcare arrangements are a major barrier to participation for women with children aged 5 to 15 years, and 13% of women in this survey cited childcare or care for other dependents as a problem. This figure rose to 37% for people with children aged 0-4 years. It appears from this that it is not the cost of childcare that is an issue; rather it is its availability and suitability in the first place.

2.3.5 Summary

Many women re-entry students are faced with a set of barriers that are the same as the traditional undergraduate entrant. Difficulties can be experienced at both the personal and institutional level. They can be connected to the would-be student's current domestic environment, personal attitudes and attributes, previous educational experiences, or to their financial situation. These obstacles can spring up to prevent

women from returning to education or to make even beginning a programme of study more difficult. Barriers can also occur once the studying is under way; such barriers are equally relevant to those who are highly motivated.

However, these obstacles present problems not only for the re-entry student, but also for the educational establishments. As has been suggested, the government's emphasis is on increasing participation in further and higher education, and education providers are concerned with attracting and retaining students of all types, who will become an asset to them. Research, though, has also shown that institutions are becoming increasingly aware of the types of barriers that non-traditional entrants face.

Since there is a push towards lifelong learning and the expansion of Higher Education, institutions are attempting to accommodate non-traditional students. Some institutions, for example, are making allowances for re-entry students with regard to entry requirements. Vocational qualifications or experience are frequently taken into account and accepted, rather than there being an insistence on traditional examination qualifications (Tight, 1993). Access courses, purely for older, would-be university entrants who otherwise lack the required qualifications, have, individually, been a huge success story (Watt, 2000). However, lack of funds and communication between establishments themselves and their target participants mean that these types of courses are still not as effective as they might be (Allardice, 2000). An examination of Access courses *per se* is not central to this thesis; nonetheless, the examples Tight gives of good practice within higher education establishments are relevant to Access courses and the impact that they have on women students' experiences and perceptions within higher education. These examples of good practice include rewriting prospectuses to be relevant to both traditional and non-traditional potential students, revising admission policies, timetabling to allow participation by those with child-care or employment responsibilities, and mixing face-to-face and distance teaching.

The research to date paints a rather gloomy picture for non-traditional students. Women re-entry students may experience difficulties in finding a suitable course, balancing the conflicting demands of home and study, adapting to the academic culture and to tutors' expectations, and even getting a place on a course. In view of this, it is not surprising that many women students do not complete the programme of study they have embarked on. Nonetheless, there are re-entry students who persist with their studies despite what might be termed the most difficult circumstances, while other drop out at the smallest setback. It seems that a combination of personal history and personal attributes both impact on and are themselves affected by women's experiences of returning to education. This is central to this thesis. Personal history and identity are reinterpreted through the prism of new experience which re-entering education entails; this is a theme to be further explored in section 2.9, on education and personal identity. The other side of the coin is that, despite the odds seemingly stacked against them, the majority of women who return to education do complete their studies. The next section considers the factors that might contribute to women students staying the course.

2.4 Resources

Less research has been carried out on why people complete their studies, compared to those focusing on why they drop out. This section looks at the personal resources which might contribute to students being able to persist with a course. Research in this area has been conducted with adult students generally, and has not focused on the disparate use of resources according to gender. Consequently, the studies reported here refer to adult students in the main, but the especial traits or factors impinging on women students will be highlighted where they are known.

There are three different incentives apparent in adult learners (Houle, 1979). These can be summarised as those who are:

- Goal orientated, who seek to fulfill conscious objectives
- Learning orientated, who seek knowledge for its own sake
- Activity orientated, who return to learning for companionship or to fill time

Returning to education and completing a programme of study can be based on extrinsic factors such as working life, general education or social aspects. More specifically, one reason people are able to complete their course is because they have the necessary personal qualities. Certain cognitive skills and strategies may be what are needed to sustain interest in a course of study; practical skills might be another asset. These are considered in later sections; firstly, however, the intrinsic factor of motivation, to both start and complete a course of study, is discussed.

2.4.1 Motivation

Motivation refers to the tendency for a person to engage in a particular activity. Studies on what makes adult students persist have been based on, firstly, the external motivations given by students. The most popular reasons given for returning to study are employment–based (Castles, 1999). Secondly, student motivation has focused on personality traits or dispositions. These provide intrinsic motivation and encourage persistence in learning. Deci (1975) suggests that adults are motivated by information from the environment, their own memory and their internal needs. Individuals need to feel competent and in control of their environment, and these needs stimulate their behaviour. Deci suggests that people seek stimulation or have a desire to conquer challenge; this can lead them to take up and complete a programme of study.

Maslow (1987), on the other hand, theorised that motivation stemmed from a basic human hierarchy of needs. Once those of physiology, safety, love and belonging, and esteem had been achieved, people could move on to fulfil needs of self-

actualization. Maslow's framework appears to be a useful one when considering what motivates adults to return to education.

A more recent conceptualization of motivation is proposed by Dykman (1998); he suggests that individuals differ in their goal orientation. He differentiates people according to whether they have:

- Growth-seeking goal orientation, or
- Validation-seeking goal orientation

Growth-seekers may be motivated to complete tasks for the opportunity they give to learn and grow as a person. Others see tasks as potential threats, and their successful completion is a competition to gain approval from peers and authority figures; these are validation-seekers. This distinction in goal orientation is relevant to this thesis, as it suggests why, when faced with obstacles, some people are willing to persist with a task while others give up. Validation-seekers aim to maintain a good perception of themselves; they see criticism or 'failure' as a threat, and will retreat from it in order to maintain their equilibrium. Growth-seekers, on the other hand, interpret 'mistakes' as development opportunities from which they are willing and eager to learn. This theory may be a pertinent one when considering adults' persistence in education.

However, a student's goal may be only to begin to feel competent or to gain promotion at work. If these goals are achieved part way through a course, the student may withdraw – their objectives having been met. Students may also be motivated to complete their course of study in order to override their initial negative school experiences. Morgan (1991) suggests that such students are driven by the need to prove themselves; this links to Dykman's validation-seeking goal orientation.

For many re-entry students, the purpose of returning to education is not to gain qualifications *per se*; in the 1999 NIACE survey, for example, 35% of respondents based their course choice on personal development reasons. This is an important

consideration for this thesis. A motivating factor for some adults in returning to learning may be the perceived need to increase self-esteem. In returning to study, many adults may come to question and re-evaluate the bases from which they view the world and their place in it. Women, especially, may unwittingly undergo a shift in the way they perceive themselves. This, too, is central to this discussion: in many cases, increasing self-esteem is a secondary consideration, or even a by-product, rather than being the main objective.

Whilst motivations *per se* cannot be neglected, other skills are required if an adult is to succeed in education. From their research, Harvey and Mason (1996) conclude that, as well as self-motivation, support from tutors and reference peer groups, adults students require considerable self-management; this is especially the case for independent study of the sort carried out by distance learners. This suggests that, even if it happens implicitly, an adult student must have an appreciation of the different aspects of self which must be orchestrated. Clearly, then, motivation by itself is not sufficient for a student to stay the course. The following sections consider cognitive aspects involved with tenacity or persistence.

2.4.2.1 Approaches to learning

A factor which may impact on completion of the course is how people learn. For example, research by Entwistle and Marton (1994) has suggested that there are two main approaches to learning, the deep and the strategic approaches. Each approach is distinguished by a particular intention, which leads to contrasting study strategies and learning experiences. A third approach is the surface approach, which has a less successful outcome. These approaches are summarised in the following table.

Table 2.1: Defining features of approaches to learning (Tait and Knight, 1996, p101)

Approach	**Intention**	**Means of achieving intention**
Deep	To understand ideas for self **Use of learning material** *Transform* material during process of making sense of it	Relate ideas to previous knowledge and experience; Look for patterns and underlying principles; Check evidence and relate to conclusion; Examine logic and argument cautiously and critically; Become actively involved in the course content.
Strategic	To achieve the highest possible grades **Use of learning material** *Organise* time and tasks	Put consistent effort into studying; Find right conditions and materials for studying; Manage time and effort effectively; Be alert to assessment requirements and criteria; Gear work to perceived preference of lecturers.
Surface	To cope with course pressures **Use of learning material** *Reproduce* material as accurately as possible	Study without reflecting on either purpose or strategy; Treat course as unrelated bits of knowledge; Memorize facts and procedures routinely; Find difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented; Feel undue pressure and worry about work.

As Tait and Knight (1996) make clear, an approach is not a stable characteristic of the student, but may vary depending on factors such as the task demands, assessment procedure or learning environment. Nonetheless, students do tend to develop study habits that result in them relying predominantly on one approach, and Tait et al suggest it is the students who develop the deep and strategic approaches to study who are most likely to persist.

A different conception of approaches to learning, perhaps better thought of as approaches to studying, was that of Kirkup and von Prümmer (1997). Their research indicates that learning styles may be differentiated by gender. Female students in both UK and German distance learning establishments (such as the Open University) showed a preference for attending study centers to studying on their own, and valued more

highly than male students the opportunity to meet other students. Women demonstrated a 'connected' way of being, both in terms of their everyday lives and in their approaches to learning. In addition, mature students' approaches to studying have been found to be 'more desirable' than those of younger students (Richardson, 1995). Research into gender and learning styles thus provides a 'better understanding of where women's pedagogic needs may be different from men's' (Kirkup and von Prümmer, 1997, p40).

2.4.2.2 Metacognition

A related ability to the approach to learning is having or developing the appropriate metacognitve skills. This generally refers to a learner's awareness of or control over cognitive strategies (Bessant, 1997). It refers to how 'learners learn to learn' within the human information processing framework (Flavell, 1979). Flavell states that metacognitive knowledge leads a learner to:

- Select
- Evaluate
- Revise and
- Abandon

cognitive tasks, goals and strategies in the light of their relationships with one another and with a learner's ability and interest in what is being learned. Cognitive strategies deal with learning; but metacognitive strategies deal with how learning is monitored, organised and reflected upon. Jegede *et al* (1999) suggest that metacognition has two component parts:

- Knowledge about cognition, and
- Regulation of cognition

According to Romainville (1994), university students must be able to manage their own cognitive strategies in order to succeed. They must be able to adapt the strategies to their personal characteristics and to the context of their learning. He attributes the high

failure rate at the end of the first academic year in some universities to the 'absence of appropriate and guided use of metacognitive strategies'.

Linked to students' awareness and control over *how* knowledge is acquired, is an awareness of *what* constitutes knowledge. Tied up with this are students' beliefs about themselves as holders of knowledge. This concern with the nature and justification of human knowledge is known as epistemology, and how adults experience education has been linked to their stage of epistemological development. This is briefly considered next.

2.4.2.3 Epistemological positions

From interviews gathered from male students each spring, Perry and his colleagues (Perry, 1970) investigated how students made sense of different educational experiences. They developed a 'map' charting how students' conceptions of the nature and origins of knowledge evolve. This also included how their understanding of themselves as knowers changes over time. This was called 'epistemological development'. Perry suggests that students go through a sequence of epistemological perspectives, which he called positions. The table below summarises these.

Table 2.2: Perry's epistemological positions

Position	**Level of Understanding**
Basic dualism	World viewed in polarities black/white, right/wrong, good/bad, we/they. Student is passive, dependent on authorities/tutor
Multiplicity	Student increasingly aware of diversity of opinion and multiple perspectives. Authorities may not hold all the answers. Develops personal opinions
Relativism subordinate	Tutors' insistence on evidence to support opinion leads to student's conscious development of analytical, evaluative approach to knowledge
Relativism	Understanding that truth is relative; relativism pervades all aspects of life, not just academia.

These interpretative frameworks allow students to give meaning to their educational experience. However, these frameworks are based upon a predominantly male experience; Mattuck Tarule (1988) states that understanding women students' experience of their environment should be based upon different developmental positions. This is important, as it highlights that women's experience and approach should be given separate consideration.

These epistemological positions and the implications for how women perceive themselves (Belenky *et al*, 1986) can be summarised as follows:

Table 2.3: Belenky *et al*'s developmental positions of women

Developmental position	**How women experience themselves**
Silence	Mindless, voiceless, powerless in relationships with authority figures
Received knower	Receive and produce knowledge from authority. Do not believe self to be capable of creating knowledge. Do not believe that creating knowledge is an aspect of becoming educated.
Subjective knower	Can conceive of significant truth and knowledge as being privately constructed and subjectively known.
Procedural knower	Invest in learning and applying appropriate procedures for obtaining and communicating. Authorities valued for their capacity to teach others how to do this.
Constructed knower	Experience themselves and others as capable of constructing knowledge. See all knowledge as contextual. Authority divested of a certain amount of power

Belenky *et al* did not conceptualise these perspectives as discrete stages, referring instead to developmental paths. Perry's model described the nature of knowledge and truth, whereas Belenky *et al*'s focus was on the origins of knowledge and truth. Central to this is the role of self in relation to others and to knowledge, and the ways in which women think about truth, knowledge and expertise are affected by the transformation of understanding of self. This change process can be understood only from retrospective accounts. Crucially, Belenky *et al* conclude that women's ways of knowing are inextricably linked to self-concept. In accordance with these models, women's

approach to and experience of education and the benefits they gain from it will differ from men's; thus the types of provision made and how the outcomes are interpreted should reflect this diversity. However, these gender-related implications were of interest to Baxter Magolda (1992), who conducted longitudinal research with both men and women. In common with Belenky *et al*, she suggested that gender-related patterns of knowing could be discerned, but that both patterns appear among both genders. She proposed different ways of knowing, with particular responses prevalent according to gender. These can be summarized as follows:

	Pattern	
Way of knowing	**Female**	**Male**
Absolute knowing	receiving	mastery
Transitional	interpersonal	impersonal
Independent	interindividual	individual

It is unclear, however, how these patterns develop, or the degree to which they arise through socialization practices. There is however, 'little agreement' on the definition of what constitutes epistemological development (Hofer and Pintrich, 1997, p89), or what links there might be to cognition and motivation. Nonetheless, these alternative views on epistemology and its stages have implications for the differential experiences of male and female students as holders of knowledge.

Motivation and cognitive style are important aspects when considering the resources persistent students need, but equally important are practical skills. As suggested in the strategic approach to study above, further intrinsic resources aiding the completion of a course of study are good time-managements skills. Time management is a critical skill, especially for mature students (Trueman and Hartley, 1996). Such skills are considered next, this time with particular reference to women students.

2.4.3 Time management

In their investigation into how adult part-time students managed conflicting demands on their time, Blaxter and Tight (1994) concluded that, apart from withdrawing from studying, there were two methods of dealing with the time constraints:

- Alternation or substitution - cutting back on other activities (such as employment, voluntary work, or leisure)
- Combination or synchronisation - combining studying with work (such as studying in the train or at lunchtimes)

Women, however, were reported as using these strategies less than men, as they often were fitting in studying to an already busy schedule. Instead, Clouder (1997) suggested that women adopt different strategies in order to combine study and domestic responsibilities:

- The 'must work harder' challenge. Women often work at night or get up early, in order to meet any and all demands
- Compromise, change behaviour while not changing demands (such as becoming invisible in study terms – putting away all signs of study before partner or children come home)
- Move the goalposts (such as involving daughters in housework)

Edwards (1993) further suggested that there are different dimensions or types of time which have to be managed. She categorised these as:

- Physical time – time spent actually doing things or being somewhere (such as at college or with family)
- Mental time – time spent thinking about academic or domestic responsibilities
- Emotional time – the inability to separate emotional involvement from domestic tasks (p74), and the guilt that comes with relaxation

Demands on women's time in both the domestic and academic spheres meant that her participants felt they should not 'waste' any moment of this precious resource.

It seems that women often adopt a puritanical approach to their lives when combining their different roles and managing their time. Working harder and longer is perceived to be the only way to achieve the high standards they set for themselves. However, good time management skills by both men and women are correlated with high achievers and low passers in academic contexts, but not with those who fail (Bernt and Bugbee Jr, 1993).

2.5 Summary

The first part of this chapter has introduced the notion of the re-entry student as having a different set of concerns to the traditional-aged student. Non-traditional students face barriers to re-entering or continuing formal education, which Ekstrom identified as situational, dispositional and institutional. Financial barriers have also been highlighted. Given these difficulties, it is unsurprising that some women do not complete or continue with their chosen course of study.

However, women students show remarkable tenacity, the majority completing their studies despite numerous odds being stacked against them. Individuals' resources contributing to this staying power have been identified as motivation, cognitive orientations, such as learning styles, and practical skills, such as time management. The theory regarding validation- and goal-seeking orientations appears especially apposite. Throughout, it has been pointed out that the experiences and approaches of women differ to that of men.

What is not so apparent is that non-traditional students do not remain unchanged by re-entering education. One gain is the enhanced economic status that may follow having more qualifications; the government has been keen to emphasize this aspect.

Less explicit, however, are the personal benefits that returning to education can bring. Section 2.2 featured examples of students referring to a difference in themselves due to their recent educational experience; table 2.3 illustrated how women students' interpretative frameworks may develop. The emerging picture, then, is of women who feel they have changed in some way over the course of their studies. For many, this is overtly manifested in the acquisition of particular skills. These can be connected directly to studying, such as improved note taking or essay writing techniques; or be indirectly related, such as improved time management or general organization skills.

What, however, is exciting and worthy of further investigation, are the more fundamental changes to the self that have been implied. Re-entry students' image of self can be altered, or even transformed, over the course of their studies. From this, it appears that returning to education has implications for personal identity, self-concept and self-esteem. What, then, are the factors which contribute to identity or self-concept formation in the first place? How does returning to education impact on those constructs? The remainder of this chapter seeks to answer these questions, and starts with an exploration of these core constructs.

2.6 Self-concept research

The issues of identity, self-perception and self-esteem have exercised the minds of philosophers, psychologists and researchers for decades. People intrinsically have a sense of self, but despite this fundamental quality, self-perception is a hypothetical construct and difficult to define. Generally, it encompasses the notion that each of us exists as an individual with a personal history and unique qualities and characteristics. Fromm's view (1947) is that self-concepts provide a stable and consistent frame of reference from which to view the world. Such resistance to change means, according to Lecky (1945), that they serve the individual's need for psychological consistency.

However, its nebulousness has led to a multiplicity of terms within the literature, such as self-concept, self-perception, self-image, self-schema, self-worth, and self-esteem. The next section examines why these phenomena are of interest to researchers.

2.6.1 Why research self-perception and self-esteem?

Researchers have been interested in looking at self-perception for a number of reasons. One is in order to establish general principles about the nature of human performance; another is to understand how self-perception impacts on behaviour or motivation. These are relevant to a discussion of adults re-entering education. Other investigations seek to generate interventions to promote adaptive self-concepts and good psychological health.

The related concept of self-esteem has been a phenomenon of interest to researchers, partly because it has been demonstrated that it performs a critical function in people's lives. Self-esteem is significantly associated with personal satisfaction, effective functioning and interpersonal behaviour. Coleman, Ivani-Chalian and Robinson (1999) suggest that the maintenance of self-esteem is crucial to psychological well-being. Indeed, the inverse relationship between high self-esteem and depression has been well documented (e.g. Battle, 1976; Hull, 2000).

A further reason for researching self-esteem is because it has been shown to play a part in individuals' motivations to set and successfully achieve goals. This is relevant to this thesis, as it may therefore be implicated in women's decisions to return to and continue with education. Furthermore, participating in education as an adult itself appears to impact on self-esteem.

The different terms, however, are used by theorists and practitioners almost interchangeably (Chetcuti and Griffiths, 2002) and this means that the literature can be difficult to interpret (Wylie, 1989). An explanation of how the self-concept and self-

esteem are formed may lead to a better understanding. The next section covers this, and points to the relevance of these concepts for this thesis.

2.7 The self-concept

2.7.1 Individual components of the self-concept

The self has been described as both multifaceted and stable. These contradictions have been resolved by making distinctions in the self-concept. James (1890) for example, introduced the distinction between the me-self and the I-self. The 'me', or self-as-object, the known, refers to what can be known about the self, such as physical descriptions of an individual's body or way of thinking. Some of these physical characteristics are given (such as height and gender), but the importance placed on them is influenced by other people's attitudes. The social context is felt mainly by this 'me' aspect of the self-concept.

The 'I', or self-as-subject, the knower, refers to the *active* process of experiencing, rather than the content of that experiencing, the 'me'. This part of the self-concept enables the individual to be free from relying totally on others' views for their sense of self. While the 'me' represents the internalised perceived attitudes of others, the 'I' can reflect upon these attitudes and act independently. James emphasiesd the crucial role of cognitive processes in identity formation and self-perception.

As well as the division in the self-concept of the 'Me' and the 'I', a differentiation has also been made between self-descriptors and self-evaluations. These are explained as '*what* I am' and 'how *good* I am'. Such evaluations are referred to in the literature as 'general self-concept' (Marsh, 1986), 'self-worth' (Harter, 1982) or 'self-esteem' (Rosenberg, 1979). The focus here is on the overall evaluation of one's worth or value as a person.

To arrive at self-esteem, James suggested that the individual cognitively processed and compared particular aspirations to perceived successes in corresponding domains, with the formula:

$$\text{Self esteem} = \frac{\text{success}}{\text{pretensions}}$$

James thus suggests that individuals' values and aspirations play an essential role in determining whether they view themselves favourably.

A related and important notion is that of the 'real-ideal self' (Boldero and Francis, 2000). This is where the level of self-esteem is determined by how close or far apart are an individual's perceptions of how they would ideally like to be and how they actually are. The individual aspect of the self-concept therefore has relevance to this thesis. If adults hold in high regard the acquisition of academic qualifications yet do not possess qualifications themselves, their perceptions of self or self-esteem will be poor. Aspiring to gain such qualifications, beating the obstacles in the way and succeeding on a course of study might contribute to raising the individual's self-regard.

As has been suggested, however, factors other than individuals' views impinge on self-concept and self-esteem formation. Individuals do not operate in isolation, and social aspects play a crucial role in self-perception, as the following section demonstrates.

2.7.2 Social components of the self-concept

The social interactionist, Cooley (1902), pointed to the social origins of the self, referring to the 'looking glass self'. By this, he meant that a person's understanding of their identity represented a reflection of how they are regarded by others. Similarly to James, then, the self is an internalization of others' viewpoints. However, for Cooley the antecedents of self-esteem were socially and much less consciously driven than

James suggested. Children 'inevitably internalized' the opinions that they believed significant others held towards the self.

Mead (1925) also referred to the internalization of others' views, again emphasizing social interaction, but also highlighting the reflexive nature of the self. People experience and reflect on themselves in the same way that they reflect on others, and also appraise themselves in the same way that they do others. According to this view, people 'act socially towards themselves', giving praise or blame. But to be able to do this, people must be able to put themselves in the role of others, to imagine how they appear to those others and to adjust their actions to fit:

> *We appear as selves in our conduct insofar as we ourselves take the attitude that others take toward us. We take the role of what may be called the 'generalised' other.* (p270)

A crucial part of gaining a sense of self, and of self-worth, is thus to be able to take on the role of 'the generalized other', to take into account the general perspective of a group of significant others. Thus, similarly to James, Mead saw the self as composed of the observed ('me') and the observer ('I'), but also comprising a 'generalized other'. Mead states that self-esteem is derived from the appraisal of others.

Goffman (1959) also distinguished three different aspects of the self. His notions of the self-as-audience and self-as-performer correspond to the 'me' and the 'I' of Mead's theory, but his dramaturgical theory (so-called because of the theatre-like nature of social behaviour) added a third dimension, that of the self as 'the character performed'. This suggests that people adopt roles, and they must maintain or manage those roles or masks. According to this theory, people manage the impressions they make in order to satisfy others' expectations. This is important for this thesis, but viewed from a different perspective: individuals must manage different roles in order to

satisfy themselves and maintain their own equilibrium. Adults may have a view of what being a student entails, and adapting to new regimes means incorporating different ways of acting and being into the perception of the self.

Yet another way of conceptualizing self-representations or self-perceptions is offered by Harter (1999). She defines these as attributes or characteristics of the self that are consciously acknowledged by the individual through language. This aspect appears important, as it is related to reflexive abilities identified by James, to articulation skills, and may be related to the apparent gender differences in self-esteem brought about through the disparate use of language by men and women.

Harter also distinguishes between self-descriptors and self-evaluations. These evaluations can be divided into those which are global or domain specific, and arise through the internalization of parental approval or disapproval. She also states that socialization influences the content and valence of self-representations, and that self-representations are developed continuously.

Another crucial factor impinging on levels of self-esteem are an individual's manner of responding to devaluation, and the way personal success are interpreted by their own values and opinions. James (1892) argued that the discrepancy between perceived success in a given domain and the importance attached to that success was a major determinant of an individual's level of global self-esteem. This is a point crucial to this discussion, given that students receive feedback, usually in terms of a percentage score, for their written work. Students' self-esteem could then be impacted on by their ability to deal with tutors' comments. This relates to Dykman's theory (1998) regarding motivation and goal orientation (see section 2.4.1). He states that, when they encounter negative events, individuals who have validation-seeking goals are more likely to suffer from loss of self-esteem than those whose goals are directed towards growth-seeking. This is particularly pertinent to this research. This view suggests that adults who are

motivated to return to education in order to receive positive feedback may have more fragile self-esteems than those students who do not see challenges as a threat. They may thus be more vulnerable when faced with criticism than those non-traditional students whose view is that 'mistakes' in the course of their studies present learning opportunities.

Coopersmith (1967) defines self-esteem as evaluative attitudes towards the self, giving the notion of 'worthiness'. According to this view, people hold *enduring* estimates of their global self-esteem, rather than having transitory changes in evaluation. This links to Cooley's notion of the consistency of the self-concept.

Despite this notion of the stability of self-esteem, people's perceptions of themselves and of their levels of self-esteem do alter. If participating in education as an adult results in such fundamental changes to the self, then this experience must be traumatic, at least for some students. If education providers are made aware of the impact that returning to study can have, of the personal as well as the academic implications, they may be better able to guide and support their non-traditional students. Some researchers have focused on such holistic aspects of the self, which this next section considers.

2.7.3 The experiential perspective

Whilst acknowledging the influence of others on people's sense of self and their capacity for self-awareness, other researchers have focused on individuals' experiences of the world and of themselves, taking an experiential approach. Humanistic psychology has looked at the self in terms of personal development, how people *could be*, rather than for an explanation of how people are.

Rogers (1951) investigated people's 'phenomenal field', or the total of a person's experience, and again differentiated between a 'me' and an 'I'. His theory of

self also stated that there were two sources of the concept of the self: the individual's experiences and the evaluation of self by others. He stressed how this self was an integrated, organized whole, and how alteration of one aspect of it could completely change the experience of the self. This is crucial to the current discussion, as it implies that adapting to study will have repercussions for the adult's entire identity. Clearly, a lot of psychological work must be undertaken by the re-entry student to maintain a healthy self-concept.

Maslow was also interested in what constituted the healthy self-concept. His theory of personality was based upon a self motivated by needs. According to his theory of motivation originally published in 1954 (see Maslow, 1987), these needs form a hierarchy, called deficiency needs. The following table outlines these, starting with the most important.

Table 2.4: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Need	**Meaning**
Physiological	For human survival (food, sleep)
Safety	Physical/economic security, reasonably predictable environment
Love and belonging	Physical and social contact. Relationships with and acceptance by others.
Esteem	Recognition by others of our worth and value. Self-respect

The need of love and belonging relate to other theorists' views on the importance of social aspects for a healthy self-concept and links to the importance of socialization and significant others for the development of self-respect. Any deficiency in these needs leads to a drive to attain them, and provides an intrinsic motivating force.

Beyond these, at a higher level, is the need for self-actualization. Maslow used this term to refer to the human desire for self-fulfillment, where the expression of the need might be an end in itself. He stated that deficiency needs had to be satisfied before an individual could self-actualize; however, it may be that many adults who return to learning are motivated by the higher level need but remain lacking in the deficiency

need at the esteem level. This also links to Dykman's validation- or growth-seeking goal orientations. If an individual's perception is that they have not yet received acceptance and recognition by others (i.e. they have a deficiency need), they will be motivated to receive that. Alternatively, an individual who has achieved 'love and belonging' and 'esteem' needs will be motivated towards personal growth and self-actualization. This again is relevant to what encourages re-entry students.

2.7.4 Summary

The above show that there are different ways of thinking about self-perception, or self-concept, and self-esteem. However, underlying these different conceptions are fundamental similarities. The way in which individuals think about themselves derives from individual, cognitive processes and also from reflecting upon and internalizing the views and opinions of society and of significant others. Re-entering education parallels these distinctions in the self, as it is both an intensely personal and a social undertaking. Interpersonal aspects seem particularly pertinent when investigating the impact on self-perception of re-entering education. The next section considers research relevant to this.

2.8 Socialization, gender and self-esteem

The difference in self-esteem levels between the genders is marked; women generally have a lower sense of self-worth than men. A recurrent theme in the literature regarding the influences on women's self-esteem is their childhood experiences, and particularly school experiences. Thompson (1983) suggested that schooling helped

children internalise the social divisions of labour, with men as the dominant group and women as the nurturers. As our culture defines and values people according to the paid work they do, unemployment or the lower status afforded to some types of work (such as the caring professions or full-time motherhood) can lead to lower self-evaluations, to low self-esteem and poor psychological health.

Internalisation of relative status results from both formal and informal interactions with significant others, such as in the school or the family environments. The importance of significant others features in James', Cooley's, Coopersmith's, Rogers' and Harter's accounts of the antecedents of self-esteem. Block and Robbins' study (of US adults) (1993) has shown that females are socialized to get along, whereas males are socialized to get ahead, and value interpersonal and individual aspects respectively. This impact of socialization on self-esteem is also reflected in Josephs and Markus's study (1992) of US psychology students, where high self-esteem women valued interdependence and high self-esteem men valued independence. The distinction between independence for males and interdependence for females echoes the gender-related patterned ways of knowing proposed by Baxter Magolda (1992) (see section 2.4.2.3), and the desire for female students to 'be connected' with others found by Kirkup and von Prümmer (1997) (see section 2.4.2.1).

This also appears to link to the two types of goal-driven behaviour identified in section 2.4.1. Validation-seekers would look to significant others for the approval and positive feedback they require. Hence they would be more interdependent than growth-seekers, whose motivation for personal growth makes them less dependent on others.

The question then arises that if the development of self-esteem and its maintenance are linked to socialization, social groups and the influence of significant others, what is the impact on identity when adults shift their social reference groups, as happens when returning to academic study? Do interpersonal aspects, such as

internalized values from significant others and social practices, provide an anchor-point in turbulent new seas? Or do intrapersonal factors, such as the need to reduce the discrepancy between a perceived real- and ideal-self (Boldero and Francis, 2000), provide a strong enough current to carry the student along? The next section considers this, and the wider implications for adults' identity of returning to education.

2.9 Education and implications for personal identity

According to Ballard (1984), all students must undergo a 'cultural shift' when starting a programme of study, in order to adapt to the learning environment. Significantly for this discussion, Hopper and Osborn (1975) refer to this as 're-socialization'. Such shifts have profound implications for the individual, affecting students' sense of self and their self-esteem. Differences in generational expectations suggest that re-entry students may have a larger gap to bridge than traditional students. For some it can be a *gulf* that needs crossing before a 'learner identity' (Moss, Norton, Thomas, Morgan and Tilley, 1988) can be adopted. Such a major task often results in an 'assault on the identity' (Harrison, 1993). Weil's study (1986) of non-traditional under-graduates shows how many go through a cyclical process of disappointment, dislocation and discovery, resulting from the disjunction between expectations and experiences within the higher education context.

Weil suggests that conditions for re-entry students promote conflict, crisis, alienation and fragmentation, as well as coherence, continuity and integration. In order to withstand such buffeting, it is obvious that these students need a robust sense of self. Ivanic and Simpson (1992) conclude that university culture puts students under a lot of pressure to change their identities, in order to conform to academic norms. They suggest that students' written language reflects values and beliefs that are central to

their non-student persona. An individual must *create* an identity in order to maintain some sort of equilibrium between their student self and other parts of their lives.

This split in persona is highlighted in a more recent study. Millings Monk and Mahmood (1999) found that the major perceived difficulties of traditional and non-traditional students were coursework and emotional state. Whilst the re-entry students experienced the greatest changes in their lifestyles, had some financial and coursework problems, a 'third area of difficulty was that of emotions'. However, Millings Monk *et al* did not make explicit what was meant by this, although their study includes reports of discontent, stress and unhappiness. Sixty per cent of female re-entry students and 50% of male re-entry students reported emotional difficulties. Eighty per cent and 60% of the traditional females and males respectively also reported emotional troubles. Whilst such problems may not be directly attributable to the educational environment, it is apparent that in combination with stresses caused by coursework, finances and changes in lifestyle, some students cannot cope with the increased emotional burden. Indeed, Milllings Monk reports that some students felt suicidal. Clearly, the change in social environment and expectations means that some students feel very much at sea.

The literature on adults' adjustment to returning to education is strewn with vocabulary suggesting a turbulent passage for adults in education – disappointment, crisis, assault, fragmentation. From this, a common pattern emerges; adults experience anxiety, and at the root of this anxiety is uncertainty. According to Hutchinson and Hutchinson (1978), this is caused by a lack of confidence in their intellectual capacity and in their acceptance as students by society. Returning to education creates new and fundamental challenges, which cause tension; according to Rogers (1971), this tension is exacerbated according to the age of the student. This impacts on their self-concept and their self-esteem.

A characteristic of many re-entry students is their low levels of self-esteem; but several studies have shown that a positive experience in returning to education can result in enhanced self-esteem. Despite this being the case for both men and women, Lawson (1990) states that women are more affected by returning to education than men. Rosalind Edwards' study (1993) of re-entry women social science undergraduates showed that the intra- and interpersonal aspects of family, education and self-esteem are not separate entities. In-depth interviews revealed increases in some women's self-esteem over the three-year course, which could be attributed to a number of factors. One woman, for example 'gained confidence' from participating in higher education, and it gave her an 'integrated identity' which she previously lacked. Recurrent themes in this study were the overriding of previous negative school experiences and the influence of the attitudes of significant others.

Hull's study (2000) of men and women on Access, Office Skills and Pre-retirement courses showed that, overall, men demonstrated a greater increase in academic self-esteem than women. However, female Access students showed the greatest increase in personal (or global) self-esteem. Again, analysis of the interviews revealed the threads of previous school experiences ('I was branded a failure') and judgments by significant others at the base of initial perceptions of self-esteem. This suggests that students need considerable psychological resources and a particular outlook on life in order to adapt to returning to education. Despite the personal resources drawn upon by non-traditional students (see section 2.4), returning to education can affect the particular trait of self-esteem.

This is central to this thesis. Perceptions of self and notions of worthiness are accordingly based on the perceived views of 'significant others', those people whose values and opinions are important to an individual. A person's self-concept and level of self-esteem may fluctuate depending on their reflexive ability, how conscious they are

of others' opinions and on the value they place on those opinions. Re-entry students who are less secure in their own views of themselves, and who are driven by validation-seeking goals, may show greater vulnerability than growth-seekers in terms of their self-concept and self-esteem.

Other research has suggested that the form of adult courses can impact on self-esteem. Willen (1988), for example, states that distance education (DE) has a major part to play in enhancing female adult students' self-esteem. The term 'distance education' itself has many designations, but conveys the apartness of the learner and the teacher and educational establishment. Together with 'independent study', it suggests self-direction on the part of the students, who can choose and take responsibility for when, where and how they study. The following section summarises the importance of distance education to one group of women students.

2.10 Distance education and self-esteem

Four years after finishing their course, students were asked by Willen what distance education had meant to them. One third of respondents stressed its importance to them as a mode of study, i.e. the students considered that distance education suited their circumstances and needs better than traditional classroom-based courses. Castles (1999) suggests that distance education rather than attending a conventional university is chosen for reasons of flexibility, the opportunity it gives for working at home and combining studying with paid employment or domestic commitments. Fifty per cent of Willen's respondents emphasized that DE had resulted in greater self-esteem. Students also reported increased general knowledge, good relations with teachers and other students, and greater insight into the implications of university education. Only 5% of answers took up negative factors of distance education.

In contrast to students who had studied before, those students who had no previous academic experience before undertaking their distance education courses were likely to stress its importance for their self-esteem (as well as for their occupational situation); and younger women students (i.e. under 45 years) valued the distance education mode of study more highly than older students. The explanations given for these points are, first, that 'experienced' students may already have had their self-esteem enhanced through their earlier education. Secondly, these younger women are the ones least likely to be able to participate in education in a conventional university due to family and domestic commitments.

Willen reports it 'somewhat unexpected' (p98) that many students attributed their increased self-esteem to participating in *distance* education. This comment in itself is worthy of further investigation. However, what is of relevance to the current discussion is that the women found distance education the ideal way to meet their need to continue their education, and beyond this, they also derived unexpected benefit, in the form of enhanced self-esteem.

2.11 Summary

What is clear from these studies is that research into self-concept and self-esteem has relevance to investigations of the experiences of women re-entering education. An understanding of the interaction between individual and social components of self-concept illuminates how perceptions of self and self-esteem are formed, maintained and developed. Positive feelings of self worth seem to underlie good mental health, and it has been indicated that self-esteem, as well as having some basis in personal judgments, crucially derives from interactions with others. Socialization practices and cultural factors impinge differentially on men and women, often with the result that women hold depressed views of their own worth. This may

have implications for women's achievements in both the private and the public domains. Despite compulsory schooling sometimes being a forum which contributed to lowered self-worth, the experiences as adults of some women in formal education has shown to impact positively on self-perception in fundamental ways and may considerably increase self-esteem. The particular example of women within distance education was given. This suggests that research combining the related issues of women re-entry students and self-esteem is needed to fill out the picture of this growing group within higher education.

2.12 Conclusion and research questions

Women re-entry students are a diverse group; consequently it is difficult to generalize about the trials or pleasures they undergo in the course of their studies. Nonetheless, the experience of re-entry students within HE is typified in the beating of obstacles, the learning of academic skills and the shifting of perceptions of self and the world. Factors impacting on women students are their past (in terms of their educational and personal histories) and their present; alongside but interleaved with public, academic growth runs private, individual development. It is this underlying theme of personal identity that is of interest, not least to education providers and to many students themselves. How do re-entry students, especially women, maintain, manage and develop their sense of self during what can be a life-changing experience?

In this chapter, barriers to study and personal attributes have been clustered together in an assessment of the impact of returning to education on adults. Common to these variables is the sense of self. Some education researchers have acknowledged this, and in an attempt to understand the motivation of adult students have investigated students' self-perception.

Attempting to unpack the hypothetical constructs of self-perception and self-esteem has shown that intimately woven together are the dual aspects of the individual and the social. Central to the latter, was demonstrated to be the impact of socialization practices and the importance of significant others. What the studies reviewed have failed to show, however, is the role, if any, that these significant others actually play in changes to women students' perceptions of self. Thus this thesis seeks to address the following related questions:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientations play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

Examples from previous research suggest that investigating the relationship between returning to education and self-esteem is a direct, unproblematic process. However, as has already been demonstrated, self-esteem is a chaotic concept, and its nebulousness makes research difficult. Despite this being such a perplexing notion, the most straightforward methods, such as surveys or interviews, have sometimes been used in order to obtain adults' thoughts and feelings about their sense of self. Section 2.7 pointed to the individual and social aspects which contribute to the formation and maintenance of self-esteem, and it is apparent from this that any such investigation should incorporate ways of tapping into these different facets of the self.

If they are questioned directly, respondents will often give the answer they think the researcher wants to hear, or offer post-hoc rationalizations of their perceptions. Whilst this may produce results, the ensuing analysis may give a rather superficial impression of the elements at play. This suggests that methods other than surveys or interviews should be considered, in order to gain a richer picture of the implications of

returning to education on adults' self-concepts and the impact of significant others. By adopting a subtler approach which nonetheless targets the crucial elements, such a study might uncover other issues impinging on adults' sense of self whilst a student, as well as offering more insight into student persistence.

It is from this basis that a pilot study was carried out. The purpose of this investigation was to trial a raft of different instruments, to see if they were feasible tools for capturing and measuring overall levels of self-esteem within a population of re-entry women students, as well as for highlighting factors impinging thereon. The following chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted in this research.

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It is from this basis that a pilot study was carried out. The purpose of this investigation was to trial a raft of different instruments, to see if they were feasible tools for capturing and measuring overall levels of self-esteem within a population of re-entry women students, as well as for highlighting factors impinging thereon. The following chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted in this research.

3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Self-perception and self-esteem are subtle concepts which are difficult to capture and measure. Research into these constructs has nonetheless suggested that returning to education can impact on women's sense of self. Using scales and inventories and direct questioning, fluctuations and changes in self-perception have been recorded by a number of researchers. However, the multi-faceted nature of these concepts suggests that no single method or tool would adequately reflect that complexity. The object of the current research is not only to chart changes in women students' self-perception over a course of study, but also to investigate the relevance of significant others to that process. Is returning to study driven by a need to seek validation from others or by personal development reasons? Consequently, for this research, methods that focus on significant others and motivating factors as well as on self-esteem were developed and used.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the decision process behind the choice of the study design and methodological approach chosen for the current research. The format in these sections will be:

- An outline of the methodological approach
- A description of each particular research instrument in turn
- An account of the procedure and scoring technique for each instrument adopted in this research

This chapter also considers the ethical issues relating to researching women's perceptions of themselves when they are embarking on a new phase in their educational career. It concludes with a table illustrating the merits of the various instruments chosen, and gives

the outline of the format for the meeting with each participant. To begin, however, issues surrounding the choice of methods are considered.

3.2 Methodology issues

The primary objectives in this research were to chart changes in female students' self-perceptions or self-esteem and to investigate the role of motivations and significant others as the women embarked on and adjusted to their period of study. A secondary objective was to avoid post-hoc rationalisation. This is where earlier events, feelings or perceptions are interpreted in the light of intervening experience. People instinctively try to make sense of their world, and may thus produce a different account of themselves once time has passed. This tendency to reinterpret events or perceptions is important when investigating changes in self-perception or self-esteem; people may attempt to justify previous perceptions. Time elapsing acts as a distorting lens resulting in alternative reports of earlier feelings being given. The intention was to capture perceptions at Time 1 (the pre-test) and again at Time 2 (the post-test), so avoiding post-hoc rationalisation.

A tool which gives a numerical measure – a quantitative approach - and thus an easy comparison between pre- and post-test levels of self-esteem seemed appropriate. Indeed, these objective measures have been the preferred tools for use in self-esteem research. The next sections discuss such quantitative approaches to research, and are followed in section 3.5 by a method that takes into account participants' subjective feelings regarding the topic under investigation. Issues arising from the pilot study (detailed in Chapter 4) meant that a qualitative approach could not be disregarded. This approach is discussed in section 3.8. The following section begins with a discussion of a quantitative orientation to self-esteem research.

3.3 Quantitative research

Practical experience of the quantitative and positivistic, 'scientific' model of research had been gained through the researcher's previous employment at the Medical Research Council's Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit. This methodological approach held some appeal for the current research, because it purports to show how change has occurred (through pre- and post-tests); to uncover the laws which relate cause and effect; and to allow for prediction and control. These seemed to be important issues to cover when researching the impact that returning to Higher Education has on women's self-perceptions and the role of motivation and significant others. The researcher had anticipated conducting the investigation in a 'scientific' way, making decisions about numbers of participants and type of sample; about how to control for variables other than the intervention of the course of study; and what instrument could be used that would be reliable and valid. This ran alongside the desire to avoid post-hoc rationalisation.

There is often a tension between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Quantitative studies, yielding data 'in the form of numbers to be analysed by means of comparisons' (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996, p21), form the type of research that provides measurement and 'objective' knowledge (Mayer, 1998, p295). If changes were to be charted in women students' self-perceptions over their course of study, it followed that a baseline measure of the level of their perceptions would have to be taken. This concern with measurement and replicability, with credibility being accorded to impartiality over subjectivity, is dominant in some research cultures; a quantitative element to the current research might give it greater credence. Such emphasis on statistics and numerical data in the form of charts and tables can easily be seen in publications such as the Government's Schools' League Tables and the Department for Education and Employment's report *Part-time Students and Employment: Report of A Survey of Students, Graduates and Diplomates* (1999). This model, centring on measurement and comparison, was attractive because the

intention from the outset was to try to capture and record women students' sense of self or the perceived level of self-esteem, and make comparisons at a later date. The features of quantitative methodology are apparent in scales and questionnaires.

3.3.1 Scales and questionnaires

Research into self-perception and self-esteem has traditionally been conducted by way of questionnaires and scales, which yield a numerical measure. These scales and inventories are psychometric techniques, involving the science of measuring psychological variables, which offer a nomothetic approach to the study of people. Such techniques have a normative focus, and facilitate making comparisons between people (how people are different and how they are similar) (Cattell, 1945). This emphasis on quantification within self-esteem research is despite Rosenberg's warning regarding the nebulousness of the concepts of self-perception and self-esteem and that 'we are as far as ever from agreeing on what it is, let alone how to measure it' (Rosenberg, 1979, p5).

Reliability

Whenever anything is measured, however, there is some possibility of chance error. Variations in results obtained with the same test, administered more than once using the same participants, may be due not only to actual differences among the individuals but also to chance factors and to any defects in the test itself (Freeman, 1962). An important consideration in any research, then, is the validity and reliability of the tests instruments.

A test is said to be valid if it measures what it claims to. There are several forms of validity, one being face validity. This concerns the acceptability of the test items, to both the researcher and the participants; participants must take the test seriously otherwise the results may be meaningless. Another form of validity is concurrent validity; that is to what

extent does a new test correlate with existing tests which claim to measure the same thing? On the other hand, for a test to be reliable, it must show consistency in results and stability, in the sense that it should give the same results if the same people are measured or tested on two separate occasions. The most straightforward technique for estimating the reliability of a test is called test-retest reliability, which does indeed involve administering the test twice to a group of respondents, with an interval (e.g. of a week) between. If the test is reliable, participants who score highly on the first test should score highly on the second; the correlation between the two sets of scores should be high. A Pearson product-movement correlation coefficient calculated on the data (two measures for each person, the score from the first test and the score from the second test) gives a reliability coefficient (Rust and Golombok, 1989). All coefficients are between 0 and 1; the nearer the coefficient to 1, the more reliable the test.

The reliability of Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale for Adults (Rosenberg, 1965) is purported to be high (a 2-week test-retest being .85) (Rosenberg, 1979). However, there are other quantitative measures, such as Coopersmith's Self-esteem Inventory (1967) and Battle's Culture-free Self-esteem Inventory (SEI) (1986). More recently, research focusing on adolescents' personality types and academic achievement has spawned new instruments, such as Summerfield and Youngman's Student Self Perception Scale (1999). Rosenberg's scale in particular, however, has been widely used (e.g. Zuckerman, 1983; Stanley and Murphy, 1997). This scale is easy to administer, having just ten statements regarding self-acceptance. The participant responds on a 4-point scale for each statement, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Possible total scores range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. However, the inventory developed by Battle has additional features that appear particularly pertinent to the current research. This is discussed next.

3.3.2 Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI)

Battle's inventory (1986) was developed as a result of his own dissatisfaction with the scales available, in terms of their effectiveness as measures of change following intervention procedures (in the current instance, re-entering education). Battle's basic scale is wider ranging than others; it has 40 single sentence questions and comprises sub-scales for the domains of General, Personal and Social self-esteem. For example:

Can you do things as well as others? (General self-esteem item)
Do you worry a lot? (Personal self-esteem item)

The SEI scale includes eight 'lie' items, or socially undesirable traits, such as:

Have you ever taken anything that doesn't belong to you?
Do you gossip at times?

Battle's conception was that everyone possesses such traits to a greater or lesser degree. A rationale for including these items in this inventory is that people who are willing to admit to possessing such socially undesirable traits are more likely to be comfortable with themselves, and thus have higher self-esteem. These items, then, are a test of respondents' defensiveness. According to Page and Markowitz (1955), a defensive individual is one who fails to ascribe to themself characteristics of a generally valid but socially unacceptable nature. Responding negatively to statements such as '*Have you ever taken anything that doesn't belong to you?*' may be indicative of a deliberate attempt to show oneself in a good light. Conversely, positive responses to these items indicate truthfulness (Battle, 1986) and a willingness to admit to human weaknesses. Admitting to these traits was an indication of the degree of the participants' honestly in responding to the other inventory items. Higher scores on this subscale would also indicate greater reliability of response to the inventory overall.

What was also appealing about this inventory was that an additional subscale comprising nine further items that purported to capture academic self-esteem could be incorporated. Battle included this subscale only in the children's version of the inventory, but it was easily adapted for use with adults. An example of an Academic subscale item is:

At school, were you satisfied with your work?

This academic aspect was considered important, bearing in mind that the focus of the research was women returning to education. The inclusion of the Academic self-esteem subscale meant that the Inventory comprised 49 items altogether, made up as follows:

1. General self-esteem items (16 items)
2. Social self-esteem items (8 items)
3. Personal self-esteem items (8 items)
4. Academic self-esteem items (9 items)

   Total 41, showing Overall self-esteem
5. Lie scale (8 items)

The SEI, illustrating pre- and post-test variations, can be found in Appendices A and B.

Test-retest reliability is an important consideration when using instruments of this type, as the objectivity of the research is at stake (Sapsford, 1996; Silverman, 1997). The test-retest correlations for Battle's initial standardization sample were .81 (Battle, 1986), suggesting consistency in response over time. Correlations with the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory were found to be significant (Battle, 1986), and the test correlates with other measures of personality, including Beck's Depression Inventory (Battle, 1977), and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Battle, 1980). Battle's claims that his scales have 'proven to be of value in providing greater insights into the client's subjective feelings' (p7) appear to have been upheld by their use in research and therapeutic situations. Although Battle's SEI does not appear to be as extensively used as Rosenberg's

scale, it was decided to test this instrument as a means of taking a 'baseline' measure of women students' self-esteem, rather than Rosenberg's, for the following reasons:

- It incorporates different domains of self-esteem
- It includes a check of defensiveness/honesty by means of the lie items
- Battle's Academic Self-Esteem Scale can be embedded in the main scale
- It is quick to complete
- It is easy to score

Ease of completion is an important practical consideration (Richardson, 2000). Limited time available and the need to deal with other tests means a straightforward inventory was crucial; if the inventory was too difficult to complete response rates might be reduced or engagement with the test compromised.

Copyright permission was sought to use the SEI; slight adaptations were made to it, changing American English to British English.

3.3.3 Procedure and scoring technique adopted for the SEI in pilot and main studies

The Inventory questions are divided into two, intermingled, groups: those indicating high self-esteem and those indicating low self-esteem. The procedure is uncomplicated; at the pre-test the participant responded to each question by ticking either 'yes' or 'no'. The procedure was repeated at the post-test, although the wording of the academic items had been altered to focus on recent study rather than on school experiences. A point was scored for each answer that corresponded to the one deemed to correspond with high self-esteem (as per Battle's instructions), so that a high total score (out of 49) indicated high self-esteem, and a low score indicated lower self-esteem. Scores were also computed for each of the subscales. Thus a comparison was quickly made between the scores achieved at the pre- and post-tests. All participants showed consistency in their pre- and post-test Lie

scale scores, which suggests that they were responding to the Inventory across the tests in a reliable manner. The pre- and post-test scores for the General, Social, Personal and Academic subscales were assessed using non-parametric tests with the aid of the statistical computer package SPSS (version 10.1). This was to detect whether there were any significant changes in scores between the initial and follow-up tests, and also whether there was any relationship between the magnitude of these changes and, firstly, the participants' ages and, secondly, their previous qualifications.

3.3.4 Benefits of the SEI

The SEI has several benefits. It allowed control over the quantity of information generated by the standardization of questions; the instructions (ticking a 'yes' or 'no' answer to 49 questions directly relating to self-esteem) generated specific responses. The procedure did not appear threatening, as the participants did not have to verbalise their responses. The numerical score calculated later gave an 'objective' measure of self-esteem, against which a comparison was made once the SEI had been completed again at the post-test. This tool was also efficient; its straightforwardness meant it was easy to administer, complete and score.

3.4 Criticisms of scales and inventories

Much can be discovered using questionnaires and self-reports; according to Funder, Furr and Colvin (2000), studying questionnaire responses has been sufficient to bring personality psychology 'a long way'. However, the use of such tools is not without controversy. Participants may lack the self-knowledge these methods demand, distort their self-image for the purposes of the investigation or be unwilling to share aspects of themselves with the researcher. An obvious drawback of self-esteem inventories is that

they do not allow the participants to use their own words. Additionally, when undertaking the analysis and interpretation, the researcher must reach beyond the self-reports or what the participants say. Hence the apparent straightforwardness of questionnaires such as the SEI may not delve deeply enough into the multi-faceted topic of self-esteem. An alternative inventory, which does however use participants' own words and requires reflection on the part of the respondent, is the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI), developed by Norton, Morgan and Thomas (1995). This is introduced next.

3.5 The Ideal Self Inventory (ISI)

A criticism of Inventories such as Battle's is that they are research-driven, reflecting only the points of interest to the researcher. Despite efforts to ensure that Battle's SEI encompassed a variety of aspects deemed to reflect the components of the topic under discussion (i.e. self-esteem), the statements may not reflect the experience or subjectivities of the participant who completed them. Clearly, the SEI does not use the participants' own words. Research on self-esteem demands a focus on more experiential aspects, i.e. how the participants experience reality. Kelly's personal construct theory (1955) demonstrates this experiential approach. He argued that importance should be placed on how each individual construes their experience and themself, rather than focusing on an objective measure which does not take account of subjective experience. Investigating such a personal trait as self-esteem may be best achieved by asking participants themselves to generate words or phrases which they consider best sum up their own self-perceptions. An adjunction to this, when investigating self-esteem, is the disparity between the participants' perceived real- and ideal-selves (Markus, 1986; Boldero, 2000). This relates also to Rogers' view of the real and ideal self, which was discussed in Chapter 2.

Bearing this constructivist and experiential aspect in mind. Norton *et al* (1995) devised the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI). This is a tool developed from Button's SELF-GRID (1988),

itself premised on Kelly's theory. When using Button's self-grid, people are asked to generate self-constructs - characteristics or dimensions which describe the present or actual self. By this means, however, it is not possible to infer the *value* or salience to the individual of each construct, but by considering each construct through the lens of the *ideal*-self the value of each is defined. Button gives the example (1994, p56) of the construct 'independent'. The assumption may be that independence is a positive attribute, which indicates high self-esteem. However, Button points out that an individual may feel that independence is isolating and wish to move towards mutual interdependence. Participants rate their own constructs, using the elements of 'present self' (how they see themselves to actually be) and 'ideal self' (how they would like to be), thus operationally defining the value of each construct for themselves. An overall measure of self-esteem can be calculated by working out the mean difference between the rating for present-self and the ratings for ideal-self, over all the constructs. This method has three advantages:

- It takes account of the participants' subjective experience
- It provides a global measure of self-esteem
- It provides a profile of particular constructs that highlight that participant's perceived strengths and weaknesses

Through its use with a small clinical sample, Button's SELF-GRID has shown that such a profile can be used as a focus for therapy, where it is helpful to know what a person feels good, bad and confused about in terms that are meaningful to that person. By administering a pre- and post-test, the tool can also be used to evaluate the efficacy of any therapeutic intervention (i.e. whether the participant's self-esteem had increased as a result of therapy), which is seen in an overall improvement in the global measure, and also in 'specific improvements in the constructs of concern' (Norton *et al*, 1995).

The ISI is a simplification of Button's SELF-GRID. The participant is asked to list which ten characteristics, using a single word or a short phrase, would comprise their

ideal-self (characteristics they would like to possess), and then to generate the ten related *not ideal*-self characteristics. These 'not ideal-self' characteristics do not have to be literal opposites; rather it is intended that the participant should demonstrate in their choice of pairs of constructs the way in which they construe themselves. This list, then, gives ten constructs or dimensions made up of the perceived positively valued characteristics and their perceived negatively valued 'opposite'.

The participant is then asked to rate themself for each pair of characteristics, by marking an 'X' in one of seven boxes between the ideal and not-ideal. This continuum allows for a 'scoring' system, where seven is most like the ideal and one is most like the not ideal characteristic. The accumulated score, gives an indication of the participant's level of self-esteem. The maximum score is 70; a high score would indicate that a participant perceived themself as very near to their personally chosen ideal characteristics – an indication of high self-esteem. The minimum score obtainable is 10; a participant lower in self-esteem would 'tend to choose ideal characteristics that she (sic) felt far removed from' (Norton *et al*, 1995), and so produce a much lower overall score. Significant positive correlations between scores on the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory (1967) and the ISI were found (Pearson's r of 0.49, significant at the 0.01 level, Norton, *ibid*), suggesting that the two inventories were measuring things in common, and that the ISI was itself a valid instrument. As well, then, as providing a quantitative measure of perceived level of self-esteem, a profile is also obtained of the characteristics that the participant construes as important to their self-esteem.

3.5.1 Procedure adopted for ISI in pilot and main studies

In this research, the participants were asked at the first meeting to consider which characteristics they considered to constitute their ideal and not-ideal selves. To help the participants generate some characteristics, the following questions were asked:

What would you like to be like? Ideally, what traits or characteristics would you like to possess? If there is anything you'd change about yourself, what would it be?

This also relates back to the SEI, where item 15 was *Would you change many things about yourself if you could?*

The characteristics or phrases generated were listed on a grid by the researcher. The participants were then given the grid and rated themselves by placing an X in a box along the seven point continuum, to indicate where they considered themselves to be at that time (the pre-test). The timeframe for consideration was 'over the past week'. At the second meeting, the participants were given a grid with their own pairs of constructs typed either side, and asked to rate themselves again (the post-test), using the same timeframe. In this way, any fluctuations in self-perception along each of the dimensions the participants themselves had provided could be measured. The post-test also gave the opportunity to discuss the continued salience of the characteristics or constructs that had been generated at the pre-test. Non-parametric tests were conducted on the pre- and post-test results, using SPSS. As with the Self Esteem Inventory, this was in order to establish whether there were significant changes between the participants' scores on the initial and follow-up tests, and whether there was any relationship between the magnitude of those changes and the participants' ages and their previous qualifications.

3.5.2 Benefits of the ISI

This instrument appeared particularly useful for this research. It allowed participants freedom to explore and articulate the issues regarding self-perception that were particularly salient to them; it tapped in to their own frames of reference. In common with the SEI, this instrument also gave a numerical indication of self-esteem at the pre-test, against which the post-test 'score' could be compared. It also gave an indication of the 'ideal self', which is considered central to notions of self-esteem. In addition, there was the anticipation that, if

significant others or their opinions – another key influence on self-esteem - were of especial consequence to the participants' construal of self, some reference would be made to them through the construct pairings generated.

3.6 Summary

Self-esteem is a nebulous concept, difficult for the researcher to define, the participant to conceptualise and both to reach a common understanding of. Although the SEI would give a level of overall self-esteem, and levels in the General, Personal, Social and Academic domains, it would not show the relative importance of the inventory items to the individual. On the other hand, because the construct pairings in the ISI are generated by the participants themselves, this instrument would allow access to what was salient to the individuals. Quantitative measures such as scales and inventories, where variables are defined at the outset, do appear to allow the initial access to conceptions of self-esteem. In the current research, the variable of self-esteem needed to be made explicit in order to make changes in its level between the pre-and post-test apparent; indeed a hallmark of quantitative research is its concern with measurability. Quantitative research therefore uses pre-determined technological tools, and the SEI is one such instrument. The debate regarding qualitative versus quantitative approaches to research focuses on epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues.

However, the criticisms of using scales and inventories in self-esteem research (i.e. that they are too narrow; ignore subjectivity; don't show the relative importance of items to the individual; are nomothetic in approach) are cautions against relying too heavily on Battle's SEI and the ISI technique. In addition, self-esteem is a highly *subjective* concept. The objective and positivistic stance favoured by quantitative methodologies could not do justice to this concept's interpretative and relativistic nature. However, a procedure more sophisticated than the straightforward SEI and ISI might uncover not only levels of self-

esteem, but also the subjective importance given by participants to particular items and how the emphasis on each item shifted over time. A more intricate instrument may be a more fruitful way of looking at any changes in women students' self-esteem. The following section introduces a composite method that focuses on such subjective interpretations.

3.7 Q methodology

Q methodology, invented in the 1930s by Stephenson (1935; 1936), was seen as a way of researching people's subjective experiences, opinions, ideas, beliefs and perspectives, and of providing an idiographic viewpoint on the topic under investigation. Stephenson reformulated Spearman's factor analytic approach, considering the subjective ranking of items rather than looking for objective definitions of tests, and looking at the data in terms of each individual's whole pattern of response rather than looking for patterns item by item. Q methodology was not, however, intended to provide an objective measure of the research topic. An assumption of Q methodology is that people's subjective experiences are diverse, and an aim of this method is to chart that diversity and to 'compare with the self' (Gross, 1995, p51), i.e. rather than asking whether someone is 'objectively' more or less as intelligent as nice looking, the participant is asked how they would rank these attributes *within themself.* This method, in contrast to the normative approach of scales and inventories, is ipsative, and looks at the person 'as an articulated whole' (Gross, *ibid*).

According to McKeown and Thomas (1988, p12), 'subjectivity is central in Q', but in this methodology subjectivity refers only to 'a person's communication of his or her point of view' (p12). As such, subjectivity is anchored in self-reference, i.e. the person's 'internal' frame of reference. Whenever someone says 'it seems to me' or 'in my opinion' they are saying something meaningful about their personal experience, and Q methodology

provides a systematic means of examining and understanding such experience. The respondent's frame of reference is preserved, and although the opinions are improvable, they can nevertheless be shown to have structure and form. It is the task of Q-technique to make this form manifest for purposes of observation and study.

As Q methodology focuses on uncovering each research participant's own perspectives and understandings, it is an attractive method for attempting to reveal notions of self-esteem. Indeed, Stephenson recommended early on that Q methodology was particularly applicable to researching personality (Brown, 1980). Rather than measuring participants' understandings in relation to 'an operational definition imposed on them by the researcher' (Kitzinger, 1999), the researcher enables the participants to model their viewpoints through 'the operational medium' of the Q sort. A fundamental aim of Q methodological research is the operationalization of subjectivities. A key feature of the Q sort procedure is to uncover participants' own perspectives, and their different understandings of a topic can be elicited. The particular technique and philosophy for gathering data (person centred and social-constructionist) and the Q sort instrument allow multiple perspectives on a single topic to be revealed. Senn states that:

> *The statistical procedures that are conducted following Q sorting permit the researcher to identify groups of women participants whose beliefs and experiences concerning [the topic being researched] are similar. These sets of experiences are then interpreted on the basis of prior research and theory, fully in the context of the women's lives. In this way, the results do not indicate 'the reality' of the impact of [the topic] on women but instead represent 'the many realities' experienced by women; these realities are then examined and interpreted.* (Senn, 1986, p323)

According to Stainton Rogers (1991), Q methodology is the only method to place the participant in control of the classification process. Although alternative methods, such as interviewing, may appear less restrictive, here the researcher chooses the topics and questions, and in the analysis the researcher decides which are the important views.

Participants may feel constrained by having to rank order items if they are presented with a predetermined set of definitions about what they say, but in Q methodology, although working within certain parameters, the participants tell the researcher which are the most important views *to them* through their sorting or grouping of the items. Indeed, Cohen suggests that Q methodology is particularly useful and applicable to the study of change in individuals (Cohen, 1976).

A goal of interpretation of the completed sorts is to determine which views or beliefs are held in common by the women; this method has the added merit of identifying group trends. This is done by a procedure called factor analysis; this is explained in section 3.7.3.

As stated above, research into change in individuals and personality is an especially apposite use of this method, and is pertinent to the current research.

3.7.1 Self-esteem research using Q methodology

Block and Robins (1993) used Q methodology to chart consistency and change in self-esteem from adolescence to early adulthood. Underpinning this research is their conceptualisation of self-esteem, which is closely aligned to the real/ideal or real and possible selves distinction (Boldero, 2000; Markus, 1986). Their conceptual definition of self-esteem is:

> *The extent to which one perceives oneself as relatively close to being the person one wants to be and/or as relatively distant from being the kind of person one does not want to be, with respect to person-qualities one positively and negatively values* (p911).

Their Q set was designed to assess the congruence between the actual self and the ideal self of the participants, with the objective of uncovering levels of self-esteem. Following convention, participants completed a Q sort description of his or her self, by sorting a set of 43 statements (printed on to individual cards) regarding the characteristics of self, into

seven categories, ranging from Most Undescriptive (1) to Most Descriptive (7), along a fixed rectangular distribution, such as shown in figure 3.1, which follows. Statements contained personality-descriptive adjectives and short phrases such as 'competitive', 'affectionate', 'gets upset easily'. In order to develop the self-ideal congruence, a second Q sort (using the same statements) was completed a week later, regarding the ideal-self. The congruence between each participant's perceived-self and ideal-self descriptions was correlated, with a higher score indicating greater congruence and thus higher self-esteem. Further analysis showed the results to be reliable.

Using this method, Block and Robins demonstrated that males tended to increase and females to decrease in self-esteem over time, and that boys and girls with high self-esteem possessed different personality characteristics from each other in early adolescence. These researchers recommend the self-ideal congruence index achieved in this way over other self-esteem scales, for several reasons:

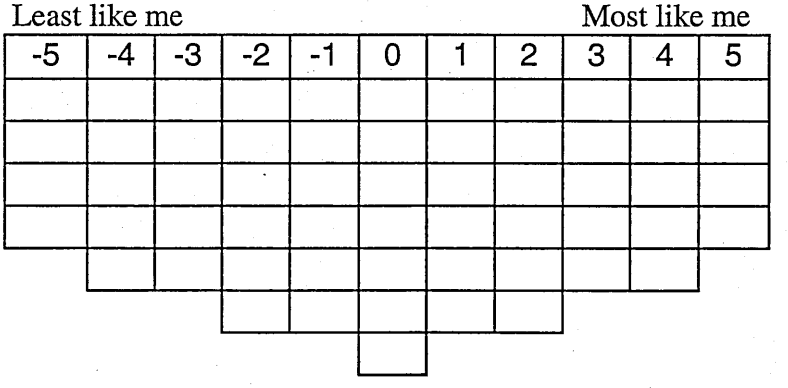
- As all participants use the distribution procedure in the same way, individual interpretations of scale do not bias the outcome
- Q sort self-ideal indices are indirect and therefore more difficult for participants to manipulate in the direction of favourable responses
- 'This type of index provides an operalization of self-esteem that is consistent with the phenomenological conception of self-esteem advanced by most self-theorists' (p912)
- This approach allows an insight into not only whether the participants like themselves, but also why they like themselves and what characteristics they value

The Q set was subsequently developed to provide a version suitable for use with adults, called the California Adult Q-set or CAQ. According to McCrae, Costa and Busch (1986), this is a widely used and comprehensive instrument that assesses 100 mid-level attributes of personality.

3.7.2 The Q sort procedure

Participants are given a set of statements, or a Q sample, relevant to the topic being researched (i.e. self-esteem), typed on to individual numbered cards. The instructions are that the participant should arrange the statements along a continuum from Least like me/Strongly disagree to Most like me/Strongly agree. A grid is provided to structure the participant's response, as indicated in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: A Q sort grid



The number of statements equals the number of boxes available; participants order the cards in the corresponding pattern on a table or other flat surface. Using the above grid as an example, the four cards/statements which the participant considered to be 'Most like me' or with which they 'Strongly agreed' would be placed in a column to the extreme right, then the five they considered to be next 'Most like me' in the next column on the right and so on. Statements placed in the columns at the extremes of the continuum are considered to be of greater importance to the participant than those placed towards its centre. Statements are not ranked within the columns. This 'forced-free' distinction allows participants to place the items anywhere within the distribution.

Such a 'forced-sort' is conforming to a quasi-normal distribution (Kitzenger, 1987), although 'the shape of the distribution probably does not matter at all' (Kitzenger, *ibid*

p83). Such a forced-sort method has been criticised, as it appears to constrain participants by restricting the individuality of their responses. In addition it appears to 'violate the assumption of independence required for the analysis of variance, as well as the assumption of equal intervals required for the application of Pearson's product-movement correlation' (Brown, 1968, p201). However, Brown suggests 'it makes little difference whether a person follows the forced distribution exactly or deviates from it within broad tolerances; the results are about the same' (Brown, 1980, p201).

The use of such a forced distribution is valuable for several reasons:

- It ensures that the ratings of all the participants have the same mean and standard deviation when computed across items
- It reduces the possible effect of various rating response sets, such as acquiescence or extremity bias
- It helps mitigate, or removes, social desirability biases as not all desirable items can be highly rated (Funder *et al*, 2000, p466)

When all cards have been arranged or sorted, the number of each statement is inserted into the corresponding box on the grid.

A key feature of this approach is to uncover participants' own perspectives of their self-esteem. This is achieved despite all participants having the same set of statements; each participant arranges them according to their own frame of reference, thus providing an idiosyncratic sort, and placing themself 'in control of the classification process' (Stainton Rogers, 1991, p130). However, despite being based on subjective accounts of self, one aim of the current research is to identify trends and to provide an analysis of the impact that returning to education has on this group of women's self-esteem or sense of self. Q sorting provides a means of achieving that, through factor analysis. The next section explains this.

3.7.3 Factor analysis

Factor analysis is fundamental to Q sorting. Contrary to most research applications, factor interpretations in Q are based not on factor loadings (or correlation coefficients) but on the factor scores. In this research method, the 'sample' is the Q sort items and the participants are equivalent to the experimental conditions or variables. Factor analysis is based on the correlations between the variables (in the current main study, the 31 women's Q sorts) and the computer program correlates each woman's Q sort with each other woman's Q sort. In the case of the main study, a 31 x 31 correlation matrix was generated. These correlations indicate the extent to which pairs of Q sorts resemble or are very different from each other. Factor analysis searches for family resemblances more generally, i.e. for groups of Q sorts, which on the basis of their correlations, appear to go together as a group or a type. The goal of factor analysis is to find a few underlying 'factors' that can summarise the pattern of correlations among a large number of variables (Kitzenger, 1987, p8). Q sorts that are highly positively correlated are likely to 'load on to' or represent the same 'factor' or underlying dimension.

There are several stages involved in factor analysis:

- Items are correlated with each other to establish factors
- The number of viable factors to extract has to be determined
- Items are 'rotated' to establish which items relate to which factors
- Factors can be 'interpreted' or explained, and given names. This is based on which items load on to each factor

The number of factors to extract depends on, firstly, the pre-rotation factors having Eigenvalues greater than 1. Eigenvalues are the reflection of variance explained by the unrotated factors. 'In a set of unrotated factors, these values decrease as the number of factors increase. However, this method [selecting on a value greater than 1 alone] can lead to the number of rotated factors being overestimated' (Di Paolo, 2001, p94). Secondly, a

Scree test (Cattell, 1977) of the unrotated factors and their Eigenvalues can be carried out, and a graph produced. The number of factors to be rotated is then determined by where the slope of the graph changes. Rotation produces a series of correlations or factor loadings between statements and factors. The next section considers these factor loadings.

3.7.4 Factor loadings

The factor loadings indicate the extent to which each Q sort is similar or dissimilar to the composite factor arrays or model Q sorts. The object is to generate an array for each factor, with scores ranging from +5 to –5 (the values at either end of the opinion continuum in this research). Each factor represents a pattern of response that conforms to certain mathematical criteria for being independent from the other factors; each factor will have been estimated from all of the data from all of the participants (i.e. it is based on calculations to do with the overall variability in the scores in the study) (Stainton Rogers, 1991, p129). One or more participant's Q sort pattern will be very similar to the patterns or accounts identified in the factor analysis. This is indicated by the participant gaining a high loading on the factor concerned, making theirs a 'defining Q sort' (McKeown *et al*, 1988, p53), or an 'exemplar'. Although in some cases a factor will have only one exemplar, factors cannot emerge out of the random sorting of an individual:

> *To achieve the mathematical criteria to be identified as a factor, it must be based upon a substantial proportion of the variability in the data, which can arise only when the response pattern is more widely dispersed in the responses of others. In this way the analysis acts as a mechanism for identifying collective understanding, albeit articulated by individuals.* (Stainton Rogers, 1991, p133)

Using a dedicated computer program, called PQMethod (PQMethod, 2000), principal components analysis can be carried out on the sorts. The factors that emerge correspond to different construals or patterns of sorting (Curt, 1994). Views or beliefs held in common

are shown by participants whose Q sorts load on to a particular factor (Snelling, 1999). Defining sorts, similar to the patterns identified by the computer program, are those that gain a high loading on the factor concerned, loadings which are 'typically from 0.9 to 0.6' (Stainton Rogers, 1991, p129), or 'between 0.9 and 0.7' (Curt, 1994 p123). The factor is then interpreted by looking at the juxtaposition of the statements themselves, from which the researcher generates different 'accounts'.

3.7.5 Procedure adopted for the Q sort in pilot and main studies

The participants were given a set of 59 statements, or a Q sample, relevant to the topic being researched (i.e. self-esteem), typed on to individual numbered cards. This Q sample featured items derived from Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) (1986), but also incorporated items regarding significant others (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1965) and goal orientation (Dykman, 1998; Dweck, 2000). These aspects (the impact of significant others on self-esteem, and the motivation to return to education) were considered central for the investigation of the impact of education on self-esteem (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 2), and had not been addressed by Battle's Self Esteem Inventory. The Q sample thus incorporated items connected with general, social, personal and academic self-esteem, significant others and validation- and growth-seeking goal orientations. This flexibility is a benefit of the Q sort, as it can be adapted to include items of relevance to the research. The set of statements, or Q sample, can be found in Appendix C. The statements taken from the SEI retained their original question number.

Participants first were asked to sort the cards in to three piles, Like me/strongly agree with, Unlike me/strongly disagree with, and a 'neutral' pile. This initial sort made the task of rank ordering the cards easier; participants then sorted the cards onto a table or other flat surface. They were instructed to arrange the statements along a continuum from Least like me/Strongly disagree to Most like me/Strongly agree.

Score or value of column	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Number of cards per column	4	5	5	6	6	7	6	6	5	5	4

So, within this example, the participant selected from the statements provided the four she considered to be the least like her or with which she disagreed most strongly. They were then placed in the -5 position. Next, five statements were selected for the –4 position and so on. At the other end of the spectrum, the participant chose four statements to place in the 5 position, five statements for the 4 position and so on. The distribution for the current study was modelled on Stainton Rogers' (1991), and Kitzenger's (1987) distributions, where the Q samples were of similar sizes (54 and 61 respectively, compared to 59 in the current research). The shape of the grid in the current study (see figure 3.1) was designed to follow as closely as possible these earlier studies. When all cards had been arranged, their numbers were inserted into the corresponding boxes on the grid (see Appendix H). The PQMethod computer programme was used to carry out the statistical analysis. Scree plots suggested that three factors should be rotated. From this data, three accounts were generated in each of the pre- and post-tests, from which interpretations regarding trends in self-perceptions could be discerned.

3.7.6 Benefits of the Q sort for researching self-esteem

The complexity of the subject matter in the current research (i.e. self-esteem) demands a sophisticated technique; it was considered that Q methodology may provide access and insight into an area which is notoriously difficult to investigate. Making a comparison between the perceived-self and the ideal-self, Q sorts give an idea of the discrepancy between notions of the actual and the ideal self, which has been shown to be crucial when investigating self-esteem. Taking the analysis a stage further, and factor

analysing the matrix of scores from all the participants, would indicate clusters of traits that were salient to mature students at a time when they were new to studying. Repeating both types of analysis six or eight months later would reveal any differences in the discrepancy between the perceived- and the ideal-self, and changes both within and between clusters of traits. The Q methodological factor analysis is important for revealing how traits cluster together; but Block and Robins' unorthodox use of the Q sort adds a useful extra dimension by highlighting the discrepancy between the perceived- and the ideal-self. This technique gives greater insight into individuals' perceived notions of self, and how they may change over time. A further advantage of this method is that it reveals group trends.

However, as Chapter 4 will illustrate, despite the functionality of these tools, there are limitations to the quantitative data generated by instruments such as the Self Esteem Inventory and the Ideal Self Inventory. Despite the added benefits brought by the Q sort, issues pertinent to this research might be overlooked if a qualitative aspect is not incorporated. Indeed, from the pilot study, it became apparent that, at the risk of the use of post-hoc rationalisation, conversations with the women would provide data of greater depth and breadth, as well as triangulation of data. Consequently, the inclusion of a qualitative approach had to be considered for the main study. This technique was adopted only for the main study. The next section discusses the use of such an approach in this type of research.

3.8 Qualitative approach

Research within the fields of education and of self-perception often focuses on the meanings, perspectives and understandings of the research participants (e.g. Edwards, 1993; Bradburn, 1995; Watt and Patterson, 2000). This indicates the appropriateness for the current study of the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research produces results that are

not obtained by statistical procedures or other methods of quantification; while some of the resulting data may be quantified, the analysis is qualitative. Qualitative research often begins with general concepts that change their definition as the research goes on, whereas in quantitative research variables are defined at the outset. As 'people often enjoy talking about themselves' (Bouma, Atkinson and Atkinson 1995, p215), crucial additional data and insight can be generated by 'asking other people' (Woodhouse, 1998, p127), by means of interview questions.

Interviewing, the main qualitative method, would mean that the researcher would hear what the students had to say, in their own terms, rather than testing preconceived hypotheses. A drawback of quantitative testing tools (such as the SEI) might be that they are too artificial, too blatant, in that they actually 'give away' or highlight what is expected to be found. The focus of the qualitative approach, on the other hand, is on research in natural settings (e.g. Weil, 1986; Gibson, 1998), with emphasis on process – what goes on between input and output (Bird *et al*, 1996). Often this involves lengthy or deep involvement; for example, Weil's study of adult undergraduates (aged over 25) at polytechnics gathered evidence through 'in-depth interviews' (p221), and Pascall and Cox's (1993) research with adult women students at two East Midlands Higher Education institutions was conducted over 10 or more years. Extreme examples of such lengthy and deep involvement can be seen in the case study and life history approaches, which the next sections briefly consider.

3.8.1 The case study approach

Although the term 'case study' can be interpreted in several ways, a fundamental feature is that just a small number of instances, possibly just one, are studied. A small number of cases investigated means that a great amount of detailed information can be

gathered. This means that each feature of the case can be understood in the context of its other features (Hammersley, 1999). The main concern may be with:

> *Understanding the case studied itself, with no interest in theoretical inference or empirical generalisation.... [however] the wider relevance of the findings may be conceptualised in terms of the provision of vicarious experience.* (p2)

Given that the main instruments were to be quantitative research tools administered to a group of women students, focusing on just one or two women's experiences would not give sufficient credibility to the research. A technique broader in scope and which contextualises the participants seemed more appropriate. One such is the life history approach, which is discussed next.

3.8.2 The life history approach

Perceptions of oneself and the interpretation of current experience do not happen in a vacuum; in order for a researcher to understand how the participants perceive their current situation and feelings, it is necessary for them to also look backwards. In order to contextualise students' experiences, researchers have considered the students' life situations or histories. Dollard (1935) states that life history can be defined as:

> *A deliberate attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and to make theoretical sense of it.* (p3)

The rationale for this approach is that actions are underpinned by the way in which the social world is interpreted by actors; this is also valid when considering perceptions of the self. According to this view, it is essential to take into account a participant's social perspectives and assumptions, which become apparent through an examination of life histories. Farnes (1992), for example, points to the importance of the life history approach.

Karen (1990) used this method of research in her investigation in America into the growth of self-identity of returning women students.

However, the temporal restrictions imposed by the PhD framework, a consideration of the limited time available from participants and the use of other testing instruments meant a study conducted over several years or involving meetings of much more than an hour's duration – typical features of the life history approach - could not realistically be entertained. The fundamental feature of a longitudinal design, however, is that it involves two or more studies of the same person or group with a period of time between each study. The basic question posed by such a design is 'Has there been any change over the period of time?' (Bouma *et al*, 1995, p115.) Therefore, a smaller scale longitudinal study, by necessity 'more exploratory' (Bird, 1996, p83), could still be used in the current research to uncover changes in participants' perspectives on and interpretations of their situation. Using brief interviews in concert with quantitative tools, within a pre- and post-test framework, an attempt could still be made to 'capture the sense of what lies within' the women students; 'explore, elaborate and systemize' the identified phenomena; and 'represent the meaning' (Banister, 1994, p3) to them of returning to education. The following section considers the interview method in greater detail.

3.9 Interviews

The interview is considered 'one of the best methods' when the focus of the research, as in this case, is the participants' attitudes and perceptions (Sivalunga Prasad, 1983). An early account of interviewing describes the process as 'a conversation with a purpose' (Bingham and Moore, 1959), a way of collecting data through conversation between an interviewer and a respondent, but this picture disguises the difficult nature of the exercise (Pascall, 1993). Burman (1994, p50) suggests there are four strands to conducting research interviews:

- Elicitation from participants their subjective meanings around the interview topic
- Exploration of issues that may be too complex to investigate through qualitative means
- Reflexivity issues on the part of the researcher
- Examination of power relations within the research

Given the focus of the current research, interviewing would appear to be an appropriate additional research tool.

The tenets of the traditional paradigm of the social science interview are that:

- Interviewers are instruments of data collection
- Interviews are a specialized form of conversation in which one person asks the questions and the other gives the answers
- The portrayal of interviewees is as passive participants
- Interviewers' main tasks are asking questions and promoting a rapport

The contradiction inherent in this model of interviewing is apparent: how can these objectives be achieved whilst maintaining 'the 'feeling' of the unforced conversations of everyday life' (Wilson, 1996, p95)?

There are, however, implications to following this 'scientific' approach. Although a good rapport (see above) can result in less distortion between the message sent and the message received (Woodhouse, 1998), the establishment of such an atmosphere of interaction and collaboration can be manipulative (Oakley, 1993). Issues of power relations arise, together with questions regarding what the researcher is using the information for, and how much the participant decides to disclose. The non-hierarchical relationship, when the interviewer invests her own personal identity, is crucial for improving communication between the two parties. Oakley's experiences of interviewing women show that participants ask questions back; women participants are often deeply interested in the issues surrounding the research and become highly involved.

3.9.1 Participant vulnerability

Any research interview, however, puts participants in a vulnerable situation. In reaction to this, one of participants' aims is to maintain self-esteem (Brenner, 1981). This is an important point, given that the investigation of self-esteem is the fundamental focus of this research. Brenner suggests that interviewees maintain their self-esteem by denying what they consider to be undesirable traits and admitting to socially desirable traits. This links to the 'lie items' in Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (see section 3.2.2). Throughout the process, the interviewees may attempt to maintain consistency; the interview situation can therefore be anxiety-provoking as the interviewee struggles to provide a consistent, socially-desirable account to the researcher. Indeed, Powney (1987) suggests that interviewees may tell lies, exaggerate or omit information in a way which misleads the interviewer, resulting in the need for further 'lies' to maintain the story and the interviewee's credibility.

3.9.2 Procedural reactivity

A related issue to participant vulnerability is that of procedural reactivity. This is where participants behave differently because they know they are being studied or observed. In addition to any intentional self-protection techniques, the participants may unintentionally alter their behaviour or replies in response to the interview questions and situation. Procedural reactivity can, however, be a drawback of highly structured quantitative research methods (such as the SEI) where responses are elicited within artificial social interactions, but Sapsford and Jupp (1996) suggest this artificiality is also apparent within interview situations. Despite being premised on the notion of a natural 'conversation', interviews do not follow the expectations of turn-taking and equality between the participants, and other steps must be taken to make this method of data

collection more naturalistic. Accordingly, researchers 'should disturb the process of social interaction as little as possible' (*ibid*).

Participants may also feel defensive because of their negative perception of the interviewer's characteristics. One way in which such bias can be reduced, according to Wilson (1996) is by matching 'the ascribed characteristics of interviewers with respondents'. In the current research, although the researcher could not match with the participants in terms of race, age or class, being the same gender might lessen any interviewer effects. Woodhouse (1998), however, points out that greater similarity between the interviewer and interviewee doesn't always equal greater rapport, nor lessen power imbalances. Similarly, Weil states that relations with her respondents were facilitated 'by virtue of [her] being a stranger with an American accent who held no power to approve or disapprove' (1986, p223).

The aim in this research, when using the interview technique, was to foster a more equal relationship and to develop an interview situation that was an interactive process, rather than it being restricted to the question and answer model favoured by the traditional paradigm. In such an atmosphere, the interviewer can empower the participants (Woodhouse, 1998) by prompting them to reflect and analyse their own experiences. Weil (1986, p222) points out that interviews may be 'a learning experience for many', and, for some women, their involvement with the current research might be the first time they had spoken of (possibly ambivalent) feelings about themselves, their situation and what had brought them back to education. This, however, raises ethical issues about 'disturbing' the participants, and will be discussed in Section 3.11.

Bearing these points in mind, the frequent use of the interview technique within previous research into education and self-perception and its potential for exploring subjective nuances, which the SEI could not match, rendered it an invaluable tool for the main study. Fransella and Frost (1977) wanted to 'make people aware of how uncommon

it is to actually ask women what they think about themselves' (p9); brief interviews would contribute to that growing body of research which gives women a voice (Belenky, 1986).

However, an important consideration in this research was the avoidance of post-hoc rationalisation. This coupled with the potential use of defensive strategies (i.e. the desire to maintain self-esteem) means that interviewing would not be used in this research as a stand-alone tool. Rather, follow up questions would serve an important function as a check, throwing light on the reasoning behind participants' responses to other test instruments. It appeared more appropriate, then, that other research procedures should precede any questioning.

3.9.3 Content and format of the interview

Participant vulnerability and procedural reactivity are just two reasons why interviews need to be conducted with care. In order not to be threatening to the participants and to encourage them to self-reflect, the questions posed in the main study of this research were wide ranging and open ended. The method followed was a 'general interview guide approach' (Tobias, 1998). This is a more highly structured approach than the 'informal conversational interview', but less so than the 'standardised open-ended interview'. The key features of this approach to interviewing are:

- similar information is obtained from participants by covering the same material (i.e. asking similar questions)
- an interview guide provides topics or subjects areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, ask questions that will illuminate the particular topics being investigated
- the interviewer is free to build a conversation within particular subject areas
- a conversational style can be established but with the focus on pre-determined subjects

Similarly to the semi-structured interview approach (Silverman, 1997), a general guide interview approach calls for several skills:

- sensitivity as to when or when not to use follow-up questions;
- good judgement on which questions will produce the most useful data from a particular individual; and
- care that reactions to answers do not affect the quality of subsequent responses (Calder, 1997).

This again, however, raises issues regarding power imbalances between interviewer and interviewee, and about the appropriateness of the traditional 'question and answer' interview paradigm. However, by not following a rigid framework, a freer exploration of respondents' meanings and beliefs (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996) can be carried out.

3.9.4 Procedure adopted for interviews in the main study

The participants were all asked the same questions, which included the following general areas:

- which course was to be studied with the Open University
- motivations for returning to study, and at this point in time
- experiences of formal education
- time management issues
- influences of and impact on significant others in regard to participants' return to education (both family of origin and current family)
- hopes regarding the study experience

The interview guides can be found in Appendix D. The participants had been informed at the outset the purpose of the research i.e. an investigation into the impact of returning to education on women's perceptions of themselves (the letters of invitation to participate in

the research can be found in Appendix I) and permission sought to tape record responses. The women were reminded that they need not answer any question they felt uncomfortable with. They were also invited to ask any questions themselves. This was done in an attempt to help the participants feel at ease and to negate any power imbalance. The impression was that the participants gave open and honest responses. Those who felt uncomfortable with the interview process were more likely to make shorter replies than to fabricate answers. Where appropriate, participants were asked to elaborate or give examples to arrive at a higher level of shared understanding between participant and researcher. This was particularly useful in the post-test interview, where an illustration could be provided to demonstrate how, for example, a participant's self-confidence had increased.

The participants had been asked to set aside approximately an hour for the entire data collection process. The 'tried-and-tested' SEI was completed within minutes, although the Q sort and ISI took longer. In a few instances the amount of time remaining for the interview aspect was compromised by the encroachment of participants' other demands. The participants' needs, to get ready or leave for work or to collect children from school for example, took precedence over the research. In 95% of cases, however, the main foci of the interview were covered; this required skill on the part of the researcher to prioritise questions and probes in order to maximise the quality of the data collected. What may have been lost by the early conclusion of a few interviews was these participants' more general talk. Such 'off the record' comments are of value; in many instances the throwaway comment as the researcher is leaving can provide revealing insights. However, generally participants were keen to answer questions and share their thoughts and feelings. Both the quantity and quality of responses differed between individuals, but the interview stage lasted on average half an hour.

Field notes were made immediately following the session, and the tapes were fully transcribed. The framework for the data analysis and the interpretation are given in Chapter 9.

3.10 Summary

The preceding exploration suggests that a combination of tools or instruments would provide the optimum way of researching women re-entry students' self-perception and self-esteem. Table 3.1 on the following page illustrates the ways in which the different instruments would tap into the different facets. Quantitative and qualitative methods each have advantages and disadvantages, but the results from different methods can complement each other (Hartley and Chesworth, 2000). Despite a careful consideration of the pros and cons of each instrument, the definitive way to assess their suitability for the planned research was to conduct a pilot study. Section 3.12 outlines the format for the meetings with each participant, and Chapter 4 discusses the findings of this pilot study. However, the next section highlights some of the ethical aspects that also had to be considered.

3.11 Ethical issues

The proposed investigations were to be conducted with women who were potentially in a similar situation to the researcher's of six years' previously. An objective view had to be taken to ensure the 'familiar was made strange' (Bird, Hammersley, Comm and Woods 1996). In addition, pains had to taken to 'make' rather than 'take' a research issue. Seeley (1966) states that researchers must guard against taking an issue to a research situation, instead, through the research process, they should make an issue, one that is generated by what is uncovered. However, the researcher's empathy with the participants meant that the participants' meanings and experiences could better understood.

Table 3.1: Comparison of Self Esteem Inventory, Ideal Self Inventory, Q sort and interview for meeting the research objectives (see section 3.10)

		INSTRUMENT		Main study only
FEATURES	**SEI**	**ISI**	**Q SORT**	**INTERVIEW**
Records change in self-esteem?	yes	yes	yes	yes
Impact/role of significant others?	no	possibly	yes	yes
Validation- or goal-seeking orientation?	no	possibly	yes	yes
Qualitative or quantitative?	quantitative	quantitative	mixed	qualitative
Other features	Quick to complete; standard questions; may be superficial; incorporates academic self-esteem items; normative; individual responses	Uncovers relation-ship between real-ideal self; constructivist; nomothetic; participants' own words	Can incorporate items on topics of concern; ipsative; social constructionist; focuses on subjectivity	If conducted last, allows further probing; uncovers meanings and perspectives and exploration of complex topic; interactive process; time consuming

Also of concern were the ethics of researching such a sensitive topic. Confidentiality of the information was a prime consideration, as was anonymity. Participating in the research might for some women be the first time they had reflected upon themselves or articulated their thoughts about themselves. This might have the result that the research would disturb, upset or otherwise have an impact on them. Such ethical dilemmas are relevant to all research, especially that involving interviewing. Oakley points out that they are greatest where there is little social distance between the interviewer and the interviewee, as might be expected to be the case in the current research.

In a research situation, the researcher's prime concerns are twofold: for 'the quality of the information sought; and the quality of his (sic) respondent's participation' (Richardson, 1965, p129). However, the researcher must take some responsibility for the well-being of the participant, especially if the topic is of a personal nature or raises issues that the participant has not considered before. Although the researcher is not adopting the role of counsellor, there are ethical considerations to be taken into account, and some basic counselling training for the researcher may be useful. For this reason, the researcher completed intensive Basic Counselling Skills and Further Counselling Skills courses at a local Further Education college. The plan was to revisit the participants once they were six months in to their study; it was not anticipated that the researcher would be a frequent or regular point of contact in the participants' lives. There was an awareness, however, that some women might develop a 'dependency relationship' with the researcher, which would have implications both for parties once the study was over. Thus contact between an experienced and an inexperienced student could be a double-edged sword: either beneficial to or disturbing for either partner.

These ethical considerations were incorporated into the planning of the practical side of the research. Chapter 4 details the findings from the pilot study, and Chapters 6 to 9 give

accounts of the main part of the study. The final section of this chapter, however, details the data collection procedure adopted for the research overall.

3.12 Overall research procedure for the pilot and main studies

The research was conducted at a time and place to suit the women. This involved visits at a pre-arranged time during the day or evening, and excluded weekends. In all cases except one, the research was carried out at the women's homes; the exception preferred to go during her lunch break from work to the researcher's own home.

Table 3.2: Format of research

1. Introduction by the researcher and outline of the format of the session
2. Collection of demographic information (Pre-test only)
3. Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI)
4. Q sort
5. Ideal Self Inventory (ISI)
6. Interview (Main study only)
7. Conclusion and wind-down.

The women were thanked for agreeing to participate and it was checked how much time was available. The nature and purposes of the research were explained, and a little of the researcher's history as a re-entry student given. The participants were told that they did not have to complete any procedure or respond to any question they felt uncomfortable with, and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. However, it was stressed that their participation in the post-test was an essential component of the study. They were told that they would not be requested to do anything the researcher herself would not undertake, and invited to ask any questions at any stage during the research.

Following a 'settling-in' phase and once demographic information (see Appendix F) had been obtained, the participants completed the SEI, Q sort and ISI. This order was chosen for the following reasons:

- The SEI is a straightforward instrument, and would provide an introduction to the topic under investigation
- The Q sort is based on the SEI, but expanded to incorporate items of interest to the study (i.e. motivation; significant others)
- These tools were intended to expose participants to the ideas and concepts related to the research topic, and thus give some assistance to the generation of constructs for the ISI

The intention was that participants would be guided through the test instruments, one would lead quite naturally into the other, but the precise nature of the research would not be 'given away'. The pilot study showed that participants needed guidance or encouragement to complete the ISI, so in the main study this instrument was embedded within the interview phase. The interview was considered a means of expanding upon or checking the responses to the previous tools, and this was an additional reason for covering this last.

Following the ISI in the pilot and the interview in the main study, participants were asked if there was anything they would like to ask or add. They were reminded of the importance of participating in the second phase of the research, and told that the researcher would contact them nearer the time to arrange the second meeting. The women were given the researcher's contact details; if there was anything they wished to raise in the intervening months they were welcome to get in touch. The women were thanked again for their time and were wished well in their own studies.

The research was carried out in two phases. In the pilot study, the pre-test took place in the Autumn Term, when the participants were beginning their new studies, and the post-test was carried out either side of Easter (April), whenever the participants could commit time. Demands of different academic timetables (e.g. faculty examinations) for the undergraduates meant that the participants could not be seen for the post-test in as close a

block as in the pre-test. In the main study, the pre-test was conducted in February (the beginning of the Open University academic year) and the post-test in September (the end of the OU academic year).

3.13 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the process leading to the decision regarding the research tools adopted for the pilot and main studies of this investigation. Self-perception and self-esteem, as hypothetical constructs, are notoriously difficult to research. Nonetheless, their importance generally and within the field of adult education specifically has meant these concepts justify the effort needed to adequately capture their nuances. These endeavours begin with searching for the apt research tools. The objectives in the current research of measurement and comparison demanded quantitative instruments; the need to capture subjectivities and subtleties required a qualitative approach. Just as there is no simple definition of self-perception, there is also no single instrument that can adequately capture its multifaceted nature. The conclusion is that a raft of tools, each with particular strengths, may be the most appropriate way to delve into this fascinating topic. The following chapter gives the results from the pilot study conducted to test the efficacy of the Self Esteem Inventory, the Q sort and the Ideal Self Inventory for capturing re-entry women's sense of self.

4: Pilot study

4.1 Introduction

Returning to education has implications for women's self-perceptions and self-esteem. These are perplexing concepts and troublesome to define, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Factors impinging on self-perception and self-esteem are intrapersonal ones, such as cognitions and motivations, and interpersonal ones, such as socialization and input by significant others. Research on issues connected with self-perception and self-esteem has been carried out, using qualitative and quantitative methods, but the complexity of these topics suggests that using a battery of tools may be the most useful way of gaining further understanding.

A number of instruments are available for delving into self-perception and self-esteem; included in these are Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) (1986), the Q sort and the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) (Norton, Morgan and Thomas, 1995). These were considered appropriate instruments to use in this investigation into changes to re-entry students' self-esteem. Consequently, it was decided to carry out a pilot study to test the feasibility of utilizing them and their effectiveness. This chapter details how this initial study was carried out, the findings from the various research tools, and the implications for further research. It begins, however, with the purpose of the study and the particular research questions it sought to address.

4.2 Purpose of the study

This pilot study was designed, firstly, to explore how an intervention (i.e. returning to education) affects re-entry students' perceptions of themselves. The second aim was to test the research instruments. Information was collected to guide the choice of tools

and procedure for the subsequent main study, indicating where refinements to these instruments were necessary. The research questions, then, were:

- Is this raft of measures (the SEI, Q sort and ISI,) effective for capturing notions of self?
- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, with particular regard to self-esteem?

The three tools used in this pilot study were Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI), a Q sort and the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI). Examples of these instruments can be found in Appendices A to C. Chapter 3 detailed each of these tools and the research and analysis procedures adopted in this study; the perceived advantages of the instruments are illustrated in table 3.1 of that chapter. It was intended to use each tool to record levels of self-esteem or self-perception at the outset of the research (the pre-test), providing a baseline 'measure', and again once a period of study had been undertaken (the post-test). Comparisons between the two sets of results could then be made, allowing for analysis and interpretation of the impact that the intervention (returning to education) had on self-perception. Refinements to the tools could be made, ahead of the main study.

4.3 Participants

The sample required for the study were women returning to education, following a break of several years from formal studying. It would be drawn from the Open University (OU) population, as this institution deals exclusively with distance education (DE) and provides 'second chance' education opportunities for adults. This type of student was to be targeted for the following reasons:

- women generally have lower self-esteem than men

- women have been shown to gain more, in personal terms, than men from re-entering education
- 'new' students might have the greatest potential for change and development
- DE is the medium of choice for many women as it better fits their other commitments, and helps ameliorate the difficulties women students experience
- Reliance on established significant others might be highlighted, as there is less opportunity within DE for contact with other students
- Contact with an OU graduate (i.e. the researcher) might be a source of support and encouragement
- The research was being supported by the OU, and results would feed back into its assessment and planning procedures

Initially, it was intended to invite those students to participate who were taking the OU's science short courses (S194 *Introducing Astronomy* and S292 *Explaining the Emergence of Humans*). These are courses of eight weeks' duration, starting in October which are designed as an introduction for students new to the OU who are due to start the Level 1 science course the following February. The aim was to carry out a pre- and post-test with the students, firstly before they began their 8 week course and secondly at the end of it. This was with a view to being able to make comparisons between their responses in the two sets of tests. This study would operate as a 'dry run' for the main study to take place in February and October with new students on OU Level 1 courses. From this, the main research questions could be formulated and the methods of data collection refined.

However, the numbers of students enrolled on S194 and S292, countrywide, were insufficient to make an investigation of the proposed type meaningful. Hence, an alternative sample had to be found. Some previous research into the self-esteem of re-entry students focused on Access students (e.g. Hull, 2000), so permission to invite

women students to participate in the research was sought from the local Further Education (FE) college, where Access courses took place. Access courses are a provision for adults, who missed out on higher education the first time round. They are courses for those who lack formal qualifications (i.e. A levels) and who want to gain the necessary qualifications to take a degree.

In addition to making enquires at an FE college, friends and colleagues of the researcher who were associated with the local, prestigious, University were approached. By this means, it was possible to gain access to mature women who were returning to undergraduate degree-level study. Although this provided valuable added resources for the research, drawing a sample from a conventional university had several drawbacks.

- These students already had A levels or had recently taken an Access course to meet the University's high entry requirements
- Although of the same duration as the OU's science short courses (8 weeks), the term was already under way
- Even if it were possible to carry out the pre-test immediately, the remaining six weeks of term might not prove long enough for any changes to become apparent
- Anecdotal (and post-hoc) evidence from a second year undergraduate at the University indeed suggested that at least a term's or even a year's interval might be more realistic for changes in self-perception to be discerned
- Whilst it is anticipated that Access or OU students' self-perceptions might change in a positive direction, re-entry students at this University may experience the opposite. This is because the former set of students have entered an environment designed to support and encourage them, whereas the latter are a minority group, slotting in to a system where few concessions are made for non-conventional students

- Students at a conventional university could be considered as having a different perception of themselves than Access or OU students – their confidence or self-belief being sufficiently high to enable them to apply to this University in the first place

Nonetheless, in the absence of students who met the initial criteria, this opportunity sample had to be employed. Admissions Tutors at the University and the FE college were approached, and at face-to-face meetings were informed of the nature and purposes of the research. The personal experiences of non-standard students have been shown to have implications for their academic careers. Tutors are increasingly aware of these, and their relevance for retaining – and attracting in the first place – such re-entry students. Consequently, the tutors were keen to be able to assist this research by granting access to women students. Students' Union representatives were also contacted, and they were able to provide valuable extra input to help recruit participants.

4.3.1 The sample

Thirteen women students volunteered in response to letters inviting them to participate. (The letter can be found in Appendix E.) Two of these women were Access students at the FE College. Two undergraduates did not reply when contacted for the post-test; consequently, the results given are for the 11 who completed both the pre- and the post-tests. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

The participants ranged in age from 23 to 49 years. Eight of the 11 had dependent children, who were aged between 3 and 15 years. Eight of the 11 had left school before the age of 17. This is detailed in the following table.

Table 4.1: Participants, age, previous educational qualifications, age on leaving school and number of dependent children.

Participant	College	Previous qualifications	Age	Age on leaving school	Dependent children
Toni	FE	Dip Performing Arts	23	16	0
Rebecca	FE	Pre-access	45	15	3
Anna	M	4 A levels*	24	15	1
Felicity	M	3 A levels and Access	42	18	2
Marion	M	2 A levels and Access	49	18	1
Audrey	M	1 A level and Access	37	18	2
Helen	M	Access	41	16	0
Louise	M	Access	35	16	2
Sonia	M	Access	45	16	2
Clare	T	Access	41	16	1
Emma	T	Access	29	16	0

* gained over several years of part-time study

M College for mature women

T Teacher training college

FE Further education college

Interestingly, the three students who had taken A levels at the conventional time (aged 18) had also recently completed an Access course.

4.4 Procedure concerns

Bearing in mind the different nature of the actual sample compared to the intended sample, some adjustments to composition of the overall study were necessary. Consequently, the following points were addressed:

- The timescale of the study would be altered. The pre-test would take place as soon as participants could be recruited (autumn 2000), but the post-test would be carried out in April 2001 to coincide with the end of the Spring Term. This would allow for both types of student (university and Access) to adjust to their new regime, and for post-test measures to be meaningful
- The main study would still commence in February 2001 (the beginning of the OU academic year). Data or information from the pilot pre-test, such as how the research tools or instruments should be refined, would feed in to this study

- Information from the main study could also feed into the post-test of the pilot study
- This overlap is justified, if the participants in the two studies are considered as different cohorts.

These timings are clarified in the table below.

Table 4.2: Timings of pilot and main study pre- and post-tests

Date	Activity
2000 - autumn	Pilot study pre-test
2001 - February	Main study pre-test
April	Pilot study post test
September	Main study post-test

The overall research procedure was outlined in section 3.12 of Chapter 3. The students' academic and domestic pressures meant that the duration of the data collection was restricted to one hour. For this reason, participants did not complete an Ideal Self Q sort.

Results for the SEI and ISI are shown in Appendix G. Scores were calculated for the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) and the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI), in accordance with the scoring guidelines given by Battle (1986) and Norton *et al* (1995), and non-parametric statistical calculations were obtained via SPSS. Not all participants were able to generate 10 real/ideal-self construct pairs for the ISI; in order to make comparisons meaningful, scores on this measure were converted into percentages. Examples of completed ISIs are shown in section 4.7.1 below. A sample response for the Q sort can be seen in Appendix H. Fuller details of the data gathering and analysis procedures for each instrument were given in Chapter 3.

The following sections document the results from the data generated by the various tools. Each data set will be covered separately, with the interpretation of the findings given. They are discussed in the order in which the test instruments were

completed by the participants. Sections 4.6 and 4.7 deal with the Q sort and ISI respectively; the following section covers the SEI.

4.5 Results from the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI)

Battle's 49-item Self Esteem Inventory (see Appendix A) provided quantitative data concerning levels in the General, Social, Personal and Academic self-esteem domains. Participants easily understood and followed the questionnaire instructions (to place a tick in either the 'yes' or 'no' column for each item depending on how the participant usually felt). The participants' pre- and post-test SEI raw scores on each subscale are illustrated in Appendix G.

In the pre-test, the overall scores ranged from 21 to 38, and in the post-test from 26 to 40. The average score for the pre- and post-tests was 32.3 and 37.5 respectively, with standard deviations of 5.29 and 5.0 respectively. Nine of the 11 participants showed an increase in SEI score over the two tests. Marion recorded the lowest pre-test overall SEI score of 21, but also recorded the largest increase of 15 points on the post-test, taking her total to 36. Anna also showed a large change, increasing her SEI score by 13 points over the two tests, from 26 to 41. Two participants, Emma and Louise showed decreases in their overall SEI scores.

However, what is of interest is where on the subscales the differences between the pre- and post-test scores occurred, and whether these changes are statistically significant. Table 4.3 below illustrates the results from the Wilcoxon test.

Table 4.3: Wilcoxon test results for SEI

	Global post-test - global pre-test	Social post-test - social pre-test	Personal post-test - personal pre-test	Academic post-test - academic pre-test
Z	-1.335	-0.172	-1.136	-2.527
1-tailed probability	0.091	0.43	0.128	0.006

This suggests that the difference between only the academic sub-scale pre- and post-test scores is unlikely to have occurred by chance. The differences on the General, Social and Personal sub-scales are likely to have arisen by sampling error (Dancey, 1999).

The Academic self-esteem subscale recorded an average increase across participants of 3 points (see Appendix G). With the exception of Emma and Louise, who returned the same score in the pre- and post-tests, all participants increased their academic self-esteem score. The most remarkable increase between the pre- and post-test scores was shown by Sonia, who recorded scores at the extremes of the spectrum in the two tests (i.e. 0 in the pre-test and maximum 9 in the post-test). Anna and Rebecca also showed large increases between the tests, of 6 and 5 points respectively.

4.5.1 Discussion of SEI

The Self Esteem Inventory had several benefits. The participants were able to fully meet the requirements of the task (i.e. tick 'yes' or 'no' in response to the 49 questions) in a short amount of time. The items were generally easily understood, although some participants queried the meaning of two questions (Item 12, *Are you as intelligent as most people?* Item 40, *Are you often upset about something?*). However, ambiguities were resolved through brief discussion with the researcher. The analysis was also straightforward, with numerical scores on the various subscales easily calculated to provide raw scores. Quantitative results gave a baseline measure of self-esteem levels at the pre-test, against which post-test scores could be compared. Statistical analysis indicated the self-esteem domain in which participants' perceptions

regarding themselves had changed. It is intuitive that the intervention (i.e. returning to education) should impact so strongly on the participants' academic self-esteem. In these respects, this was a successful tool. Where there was a reduction in participants' scores between the pre- and post-test, the magnitude of the decline was fairly small, and this may be ascribed to test-retest reliability. By the same token, if this test was repeated with a different eleven participants, totally different scores could arise, purely by chance. The small sample size therefore has implications for the dependability of these results.

Talking about self-concept inventories, but equally relevant to measures of self-esteem, Markus and Nurius (1986) state that 'inventories ask, in effect, who you are *now*, but they do not inquire who you want to be or who you are afraid of becoming' (p957). This discrepancy between the current and the future self, or the distinction between the real and ideal-self, has been shown to be a fundamental to self-esteem (Boldero and Francis, 2000) (see Chapter 2, section 2.7.1). The Self Esteem Inventory does not address this important aspect. Additionally, this quantitative method 'exclude[s] the possibility of competing or conflicting positions among the participants' (Snelling, 1999, p248). Participants were restricted to answering yes or no to the SEI items; there was no middle ground and any questioning of the meaning of statement was not apparent in the dichotomous yes/no answers required. The SEI is a rigid tool, and whilst it went some way in uncovering perceived levels of self-esteem, it did not go far enough. An alternative method, the Q sort, allowed the participants flexibility and control; additionally, a second set of instructions could be issued, pertaining to participants' ideal selves. The results from this instrument are discussed next.

4.6 Results from the Q sort

The Q sample was designed to integrate statements relating to factors relevant to the research with Battle's SEI items. Each card or statement was numbered, as shown in the Q sample in Appendix C. The Q sort method and analysis procedure were detailed in section 3.7 of Chapter 3. An example of a completed grid is illustrated in Appendix H.

The PQMethod computer analysis package can identify up to 8 different factors, or patterns of response to the Q set. However, requesting this number of factors would mean that, as there were only 11 participants, most participants would create a factor of their own. If each factor is identified by only one participant's sort, the resulting interpretation is less secure (Kitzenger, 1987). Three factors were identified, meaning that three different accounts regarding self-esteem would be interpreted, described and analysed. The table below indicates to which account each participant's sort was allocated for the pre- and post-tests.

Table 4.4: Allocation to Accounts in pre- and post-tests

Pre-test

Participant	Account
Anna	A
Helen	A
Rebecca	A
Toni	A
Felicity	B
Marion	B
Sonia	B
Emma	C
Clare	C
Audrey	Not allocated
Louise	Not allocated

Post-test

Participant	Account
Anna	D
Helen	D
Marion	D
Toni	D
Audrey	E
Emma	E
Clare	E
Louise	E
Rebecca	E
Felicity	F
Sonia	Not allocated

A Growth seeking and general self-esteem account

B Mixed account
C General self-esteem account
D General and social self-esteem account
E Academic and general self-esteem account
F (Insecure loading)

Some participants' sorts were sufficiently idiosyncratic for them not to be allocated to one of the three accounts generated for each test (i.e. Audrey and Louise in the pre-test and Sonia in the post-test). Felicity was the only participant demonstrating Account F, rendering an interpretation of that account insecure. Although Stewart asserts that 'Q methodology is an idiographic technique that is best suited for use with small samples' (Stewart, 1999), it may be that this sample was *too* small.

4.6.1 Summary of pre-test accounts

Listed below are the statements placed in the top three 'most like me' columns, common to those participants who loaded onto the same factor (i.e. who gave similar accounts).

Account A: Growth Seeking and General Self Esteem Account

- Studying will help me realise my potential
- The personal challenge of studying is important
- I like being female
- I am as happy as most people

Participants who gave this type of account were likely to score highly on the global measure within the SEI: Helen scored 14; Rebecca scored 16; and Toni scored 15. 41% of the 'most like me' statements common to this account were related to general self-esteem, and 33% of the remaining statements related to growth-seeking statements.

Account B: Mixed Account

- The approval of my family, colleagues and tutor is important
- Completing this course will give me more confidence

- Other members of my family always seem to do better than me

Participants who gave this type of account, Marion, Sonia and Felicity, were three of the four lowest scorers overall on the SEI. However, the statements they allocated in common to the top three 'most like me' positions in the Q sort were more widely spread: 30% related to growth seeking; another 30% related to significant others; 20% related to global self esteem, and the remaining 20% was split between validation seeking and personal self esteem.

Account C: General Self Esteem Account

- I am as happy as most people
- I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks
- I like being female

As only two participants loaded on to the third account, this interpretation is less secure. However, all of the common statements in the 'most like me' part of the sorts related to general self-esteem.

Although the participants sorted the cards idiosyncratically, subjecting the sorts to computer and manual analysis indicated patterns, or group trends, within the participants' perceptions.

4.6.2 Summary of post-test accounts

As Table 4.4 illustrated, different accounts were given in the post-test. Listed below are the statements placed in the top three 'most like me' columns, common to those participants who loaded onto the same factor (i.e. who gave similar accounts).

Account D: General and Social Self Esteem Account

- I am as happy as most people
- I am as important as most people

- Most people I know like me
- I am as intelligent as most people

Participants loading onto this factor were Anna, Helen, Marion and Toni. With the exception of Marion, these participants showed increases in their SEI scores in the post-test.

Account E: Academic and General Self Esteem Account

- At college I am doing the best I can
- I am as happy as most people

Participants loading onto this factor were Louise, Clare Audrey and Emma. These participants showed a mixture of increases and decreases on their SEI and ISI scores.

Account F: The third account

This final post-test account was loaded onto by only one participant, Felicity. This means that this is a completely idiosyncratic sort, and any interpretation given for this account is insecure.

4.6.3 Comparison of the accounts/groupings

Of equal interest to who has sorted their statements in similar ways, is how the groupings have changed.

- Anna, Helen and Toni remained in the same groups;
- Emma and Clare remained together;
- Audrey and Louise who did not load onto an account in the pre-test are grouped in the post-test with Emma, Clare and Rebecca.

From this, it appears that the story which Anna, Helen and Toni told about themselves in the pre-test – one relating to growth-seeking and with an emphasis on general self-esteem – became one still centring on general self esteem, but now focusing

on social self-esteem rather than goal orientation. It suggests that these participants developed over the course of the research in similar ways. Emma and Clare's account altered to include a concern with academic self-esteem as well as more general self-esteem aspects. In the post-test, Audrey and Louise provided more coherent sorts, which meant they grouped with others onto the academic and general self-esteem account. This indicates that they may have developed more than the other participants over the course of the research; from providing highly individual sorts in the pre-test, they demonstrated in the post-test similarities with others in the cohort. The suggestion is that this instrument is adept at illustrating group trends.

4.6.4 Discussion of Q sort

The Q sort was a much more intricate instrument than the Self Esteem Inventory and participants found this tool much more challenging to complete. Nonetheless, the statements were understood and were meaningful to the women, indicating the instrument's face validity. However, whilst some women were readily able to distinguish between those items which were 'Very much like me' and those that were less 'like me', some wanted to place more than four items in the extreme positions. In the post-test for example, Anna, who showed a dramatic increase in self-esteem across the pre- and post-tests, had seven items to place in the 5, Most like me, column. Rebecca, who maintained a similar level of self-esteem across the pre- and post-tests, thought that the emphasis of the items was too much towards negative statements. Some women thought that the 59 statements were too many to manipulate. However, a Q sample of this size compares with Stainton Roger's Q-Set of 80 items (1991) and the California Q-set which comprises 100 items (Block, 1978). Curt suggests that a sample of 80-90 propositions is 'about the upper limit of what people appear to be able to manage' (Curt, 1994, p121).

The task was more time consuming to complete than the SEI, mostly because the participants engaged with it seriously and considered carefully where to place the statements. Analysis of the completed sorts was also a lengthy process. However, it was useful for indicating similarities in the participants' sortings and thus group trends. The exemplars for each account generated by the computer programme gave insights into aspects particularly salient to self-esteem. The accounts or stories collected by this technique were expressed by the individual participants, yet there were sufficient similarities for them to be allocated to 'communal' accounts. The sorts provided a wealth of data regarding subjective feelings about self over and above what the SEI alone divulged. The two appear to be complementary instruments.

It was intended that participants should complete a sort for both their perceived *current* and their *ideal* self (see Chapter 2, section 2.7.1 and Chapter 3, section 3.7.1). However, the exacting nature of the task and restrictions on the students' time meant that it was not feasible for them to attempt the Q sort procedure under new instructions, as well as completing the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI). As this latter instrument was also intended to highlight differences between participants' current and ideal selves, as well as use their own words, priority was given to testing this third instrument. The outcome of the ISI is detailed next.

4.7 Results from the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI)

The purpose of using the ISI was that it taps in to the ways in which individuals construe their experiences and make sense of themselves. This constructivist and experientialist approach (Kelly, 1955) makes different demands of the participants than the SEI and Q sort, where they were presented with a ready set of questions or statements. In the ISI, participants have to generate words or phrases themselves. They are asked to provide ten pairs of constructs that indicate their perception of an ideal and

not-ideal self; these bi-polar constructs are idiosyncratic and salient only to them. Chapter 3 detailed the procedure for this task.

The next section gives examples of ISI grids completed by two participants, and section 4.7.2 details the results from the sample overall.

4.7.1 Illustrations of completed ISIs

The two examples of completed ISIs which follow serve several functions. Firstly, it can be seen how this method allows individuals the freedom to choose construct pairs, which are idiosyncratic. This results in a 'profile' for that person. The profiles give an indication of the discriminations these participants made when trying to understand themselves, and illustrate what are salient constructs to each individual. Secondly, the profiles show how discriminations varied between the participants. Thirdly, the examples demonstrate how the grid is used to uncover the participants' level of self-esteem, through their rating of themselves on the construct dimensions. Finally, the comparison between the pre- and post-test ratings suggests how participants' perceptions of self changed over time.

The first illustration is of the ISI grid of a participant who scored highly on this measure, indicating high self-esteem. The second is the ISI grid of a student who has lower self-esteem. On the following grids, the pre-test response is indicated by an 'X' and the post-test response by an 'O'.

Table 4.5: Audrey's ISI profiles

Ideal Self			.	mid point				Not ideal self
fulfilled		X	O					unfulfilled
approachable	X		O					unapproachable
good mother		X	O					bad mother
honest	X	O						dishonest
loving	X	O						unloving/unloved
achievement of degree			X	O				failure
supportive	X		O					unsupportive
healthy			X	O				unhealthy
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

From this profile, it can be seen that at the pre-test, Audrey generated construct pairs relating to personal qualities, roles and academic concerns. At the pre-test ('X's on the above grid) she perceived herself as approachable, honest, loving and supportive (7 points each). She viewed herself only slightly less positively with regard to the attainment of her degree and to her health (6 points each). Audrey perceived herself to be located in the upper half of the spectrum for all the construct pairs generated, which suggests she is close to her ideal self. Her overall ISI score is calculated by adding the points determined by the positioning of the 'X's on the chart. This gives a total of 50, out of a possible 56, or 89%. This represents a high self-esteem score.

The grid completed at the post-test (indicated by 'O's on the above grid) suggests that Audrey's perception of herself six months in to her studies had shifted. The contrast with her pre-test profile is clear, with all constructs being rated less positively. Her score at the post-test amounted to 40 out of 56, or 71%. This suggests that her self-esteem decreased over the course of the research. From the data generated, it is difficult, however, to say why this might be so. Clearly, discussion with the participant would shed light on this, and points to the role here of an interview.

A different type of profile and a contrasting self-esteem change is illustrated by another participant, Marion. The grid below shows her pre- and post-test profiles, again using 'X's to denote the pre-test scoring and 'O's for the post-test.

Table 4.6: Marion's ISI profiles

Ideal Self				mid point				Not ideal self
happy		O			X			sad
fulfilled		O		X				depressed
confident	O					X		edgy
economically independent						X	O	poor
popular		O		X				unpopular
employable						X O		unemployed
secure						XO		insecure
beautiful						XO		ugly
intelligent		O		X				thick
fit/healthy				O	X			sick
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

Marion's profile includes construct pairings related to psychological traits, physical attributes and financial concerns. At the pre-test, all her ratings fell at or below the mid point, giving a total of 28 out of a possible 70, or 40%. These ratings suggest she is a long way from her ideal-self, and thus low in self-esteem.

At the post-test, however, a different profile emerged. The 'O's on the chart above show that at this stage her perception of herself on three dimensions had remained the same, on one had fallen, but on the remaining six had increased. Her score at the post-test was 42 (out of 70), or 60%. This suggests that over the course of the research her self-esteem had increased considerably.

These examples illustrate how this method pinpoints what is especially salient to the individual, because of the construct pairs that were generated. They give an indication of the ways in which these participants construed themselves. The grids highlight how the profiles generated differ from any other. The construct ratings delve more deeply into the participants' perceptions of self, showing proximity to or distance from the ideal- and the not-ideal selves. In terms of the ratings applied, the contrast between Audrey's and Marion's profiles is striking. At the pre-test, Marion perceived herself as being very much nearer the not-ideal-self than the ideal-self, with all characteristics being rated in the negative side of the grid. Whilst she did not rate herself as nearest the not-ideal on any of the dimensions (i.e. a rating of 1), the highest

Marion rated herself was only mid way (i.e. 4). Audrey, on the other hand, rated herself as nearest to the ideal on 4 dimensions (i.e. 7); she did not rate herself below 5 for any of the construct pairs.

The grids also show how perceptions of self changed over time. Audrey's post-test grid records a decrease in self-esteem, through her ratings being placed nearer to the not-ideal end of the spectrum. On every dimension she indicated a movement towards her not-ideal self; this method interprets that as a lowering of self-esteem. In contrast, Marion rated herself nearer the not-ideal for just one characteristic pairing, although three others remained the same as at the post-test. Nonetheless, Audrey's lower post-test self-esteem score of 71% is still higher than Marion's improved post-test self-esteem score of 60%. What is of relevance, though, is that this Inventory demonstrates quickly and easily the way in which participants perceived themselves, and how that perception changed over time. It also indicates what are contributing factors or concerns. This may provide a gateway for analysis and discussion, possible only through a question and answer session.

4.7.2 Overall ISI results

A particular noteworthy point arising from Audrey's grid is that she was able to generate only seven pairs of constructs, despite the instructions requesting 10 pairs. Of the 11 participants, 3 others were similarly unable to generate the requisite number of construct pairings. Louise, Anna and Emma provided 8, 4 and 2 construct pairs respectively. This may be a shortcoming of this tool, or an indication of the difficult subject matter with which this project is concerned.

Difficulty with generating construct pairs meant that the researcher offered prompts. This meant that in some cases conversation developed, resulting in some self-disclosures of a very personal nature. For example, three participants found that

reflecting upon themselves and their experiences as a re-entry student provoked strong emotions. These participants spoke of feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to conventional students; that they did not deserve their place at university; and were afraid of being 'found out'. These are sentiments found in the Impostor Phenomenon (Clance and Imes, 1978; Sonnak, 2001), where high-achieving people, deserving of their success, nonetheless believe they are intellectual frauds (Clance, 1985). At the pre-test, Felicity became tearful whilst thinking about how she construed herself; Louise and Audrey became upset during the post-test. This suggests that Weil's point regarding the interview as 'a learning experience for many' (see Chapter 3, section 3.9) is also applicable in other research encounters, and highlights the issue of researchers' responsibility for the well-being of their interviewees (see Chapter 3, section 3.11). However, at the post-test, Felicity stated that she had found this particular pre-test episode to be 'cathartic', and in talking to the researcher she felt she had benefited from 'getting things off her chest'. Others appeared to appreciate the opportunity to raise concerns and voice opinions with an empathic listener, in a non-threatening and confidential environment. This underlines the sensitive nature of the research topic, and points to the importance of an interview or more conversational approach in this type of investigation.

The different numbers of construct pairs generated by the women made direct comparisons problematic. In order to evaluate participants' self-esteem levels, as measured by this instrument, and to be able to indicate group trends, all scores were converted into percentages. The pre- and post-test ISI scores, on that basis, for all the participants are illustrated in Appendix G. One implication of converting scores to percentages is that it leads to a comparison of constructs that vary in the number of scales used. A means of counteracting this would be to alter the task to require all participants to generate a fewer number of constructs.

The highest score (converted into percentages) was 89 (Audrey, pre-test) and the lowest was 40 (Marion, pre-test), giving a range of 49. The mean score for the pre-test was 55.8, with a standard deviation of 16.56. In the post-test, the average score was 62.1, standard deviation of 17.56. The standard deviations were quite high and the reasonable range suggests the ISI is useful as a discriminator between participants with high and low self-esteem.

The illustrations of the completed ISIs show that very different profiles emerge. There is clearly a difference between high and low scorers, both in their overall ISI scores and in the pairs of constructs they generated. However, the Wilcoxon test indicated that there was no significant statistical difference between the pre- and post-ISI scores.

4.7.3 Discussion of ISI

Completing the ISI was more problematic for some participants than had been anticipated. While the majority of the women (7 out of the 11) were able to meet the demands of the task, four participants were unable to generate the required number of construct pairs. This remained so even when the researcher gave verbal prompts. This could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Firstly, inability to fulfil the demands of the task could be taken as contentment with the self, because no ideal-self traits were lacking. Alternatively, this could be an indication that the women were simply unable to articulate their thoughts; the concept of an ideal self and the discrepancy between that and the current self may have been a novel one to them. On the other hand, inability to generate construct pairings may have been a reflection of the complexity of the subject matter. A final interpretation, however, could be that of disaffection with the self - low self-esteem – and manifested in an unwillingness to acknowledge perceived shortcomings. This suggested that, for the main study, participants may need more

overt guidance with this task than the covert exposure to concepts and ideas that the SEI and Q sort were intended to provide.

The ISI's simple scoring scheme (albeit converted here into percentages) provided a quick insight into levels of self-esteem. Differences between all individuals' scores at the pre- and post-tests were readily apparent; the self-esteem of the group as a whole increased over the course of the research, although this was not of a statistically significant level. This instrument recorded lower post-test scores for five of the women, indicating a decrease in self-esteem. However, the magnitude of these decreases is fairly small and, as with the SEI, could be attributed to problems of test-retest reliability. Sample size may also be an issue here. Analysis of the types of construct pairs generated showed what were particularly salient factors or concerns. This is especially useful, as this research is concerned not only with changes in self-esteem but also with contributory factors. Despite not all participants fully completing the ISI, this instrument nonetheless offers insights that the previous two instruments were not concerned with.

In addition to reviewing the suitability of the research tools, a further point to be borne in mind was that of researcher reflexivity. This issue is briefly considered next.

4.8 Researcher reflexivity

The researcher's own history and personal involvement in the research area might have implications for the way in which the research was developed, carried out and analysed. Burman (1994) states that concomitant with interviewing is the issue of researcher reflexivity; this is, however, an issue relevant to quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Researchers are obviously part of the research process (Bird, 1996); they don't stand outside it, but are forced to confront their own participation (Banister, Burma, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, 1994). An awareness of the familiarity of

a researcher with the situation they are researching can make them blind to other aspects raised by the participants. This can lead to selective perception or bias in both the lines of enquiry and the interpretation of the data. Becker (1971) states:

> *It takes a tremendous effort of will and imagination [on the part of the researchers] to stop seeing things that are conventionally 'there'...it is like pulling teeth to get them to see or write anything beyond what [they] know.* (p10)

Research, whether using interviews or quantitative methods, is always carried out from a particular standpoint, and it is always necessary to consider the 'position of the researcher', both with regard to the definition of the problem, and to the interaction of the researcher with the data to produce a particular kind of sense. According to Banister *et al* (1994), however, 'subjectivity is a resource, not a problem'. The phenomenon under investigation may best be explained by exploring the ways in which the subjectivity of the researcher has defined the problem in the first place. Personal reflexivity takes into account who the researcher is, their individuality and how personal interests and values influence the research process. Callaway (1981) acknowledges the use of 'ourselves as our sources', and Marshall (1986) states that she has always chosen to research issues that have personal significance. In the current study, the researcher's own investment in the research topic was seen as an advantage. Admitting involvement, to the participants and in reports, breaks down the 'myth of disembodied, abstract knowledge' (Wilkins, 1993), and helps in deciding on the focus of the enquiry.

Although they are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable, personal and functional reflexivity can be distinguished, the latter focusing more on the research than the researcher (Wilkinson, 1988). Before the investigations (the pilot and the main studies), the researcher carried out the 'procedures', and analysed the responses. By answering the questionnaires, completing the Q sorts, and, subsequently, recording

replies to the interview questions, the aim was to air personal thoughts and experiences, and so keep out of the participants' 'space' when it came to their turn.

It must also be borne in mind that however rigorous the method, the research is always a construction. Interpretation is a process that changes as the relation to the world changes. There may well be, in this instance, factors unrelated to returning to education that caused the changes in self-perception or self-esteem. Obviously, the researcher had no control over these other factors, and the research design was not sufficient to rule out alternative explanations for perceived variations. Using several tools in conjunction, however, appears to broaden the base from which interpretations can be made.

Conducting a pilot study enabled the working through of these issues regarding reflexivity, as well as an assessment of the research tools. The next section summarises the value of the instruments to this study.

4.9 Success of the tools for addressing the research questions

The research question for this pilot study were:

- Is this raft of measures (the SEI, ISI and Q sort) effective for capturing notions of self?
- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, with particular regard to self-esteem?

The SEI, Q sort and ISI had different merits and shortcomings. The SEI provided a quick insight into perceived levels of self-esteem, and indicated changes to it over the course of the research. The implication from this tool was that returning to education has a positive effect on self-esteem. Participants found this instrument straightforward to complete. The Q sort was a much more intricate entity; although responses could be

looked at on an individual-by-individual basis, this tool was also useful for revealing patterns in the women's perceptions, so leading to the identification of group trends. The relative importance to the women of other aspects considered important when investigating self-esteem (i.e. significant others and goal orientation) were uncovered. This instrument suggested that over the course of the research, the students' perceptions of themselves changed, towards a more positive self-concept. However, completing this task was a challenge for some participants, and the proposed ideal-self sort was not carried out.

The ISI also provided a test of some of the participants' capabilities. Previous research using this tool had not suggested that generating bi-polar constructs would be so difficult or problematic. Although the timing of this task, after the SEI and Q sort, had been considered appropriate – exposure to ideas and concepts within these other tools intended to provide prompts – clearly more help or guidance was needed. Again changes to self-esteem could be easily discerned, and informative profiles were provided from the constructs that were generated. The construct pairing also showed what was of particular salience to participants, and these could be related to the subsidiary interest of this research (namely significant others and goal orientation).

In summary, each tool contributed something towards charting or understanding changes in the women's perceptions of self whilst adjusting to a new academic environment. However, no instrument was without its shortcomings. The table below shows how successful each tool was for meeting the pilot study objectives.

Table 4.7: Comparative ability of SEI, Q sort and ISI techniques to meet objectives of the pilot study

	Instruments		
Features	**SEI**	**Q sort**	**ISI**
Easy for participants to use?	Yes	Challenging and time consuming	Problematic for some
Did they understand the task? Was it meaningful to them?	Yes. Some items ambiguous	Yes	Yes
Analysis straightforward?	Yes	More intricate; partially computer-based	Yes, although percentages used
What did results show?	Overall and sub-scale levels of self-esteem	Group trends as well as individual scores	Overall level of self-esteem; how participants construed themselves; real-ideal self constructs
Particular features	Quantitative; quick and easy comparisons	Quantitative and qualitative; flexible; allowed participants control; ipsative; generated rich data	Quantitative and qualitative; highlighted necessity of 'talk'
Particular weaknesses	Narrow in scope; may be superficial	Time consuming; may be too complex	Task demands not met

This pilot study focused on a diverse cohort, which included women with very few formal qualifications and little experience of studying as well as those who had recently acquired A levels or their equivalent. This is important: if this battery of tests was successful in uncovering such notions amongst a group comprised of extremes, where there was wide variation of experience, the implication is that there would be a good chance of it picking up perceptions and related themes amongst the more homogenous group (i.e. all women studying with the OU; no recent academic experience) the main study was intending to focus upon. It was anticipated that any skewing of results caused by the small sample size would not be apparent in the main study by the recruitment of a greater number of participants.

The final section pulls together the findings from the research tools, and makes clear the implications of these for the main study.

4.10 Conclusions and implications

What was confirmed from conducting this pilot study was that perceptions of self and levels of self-esteem are as difficult to capture and measure as the literature warned. Nonetheless, they are not impossible to research. What, then, has been learnt from this pilot study?

- Returning to education impacts on women students' sense of self and self-esteem in various ways.

These tools suggest that, generally, the women's self-esteem increased over the duration of the study. Perceptions of self altered as they adjusted to their new roles as students, and integrated new and existing responsibilities. For some, this was a wholly positive experience; new doors were opened to them and in some cases (e.g. Marion) a different identity emerged. For others, perceptions of self over the research period appeared to come under threat, were shown to be vulnerable and, in some areas, became less positive than formerly. Clearly, however, the heterogeneity of re-entry students leads to a multiplicity of reactions and experiences.

These varying outcomes were reflected in the data generated by the SEI, Q sort and ISI. Through informal conversation, the women were keen to expand upon the issues that had been highlighted by the tasks. This points to the particular role of the interview. Although an intention was to avoid the post-hoc rationalisation that is prevalent in interview situations, when the women are given the opportunity to articulate their thought processes further insight can be gained. Evidently, research into such an elusive, subjective topic cannot be based solely on quantitative, pencil-and-paper type tests. The answer to the pilot study's second research question, then, is:

- This raft of measures is partially effective in capturing notions of self-perception and self-esteem, but, as it stands, is not adequate

How, then, do these findings shape the main study?

SEI Adequate as it stands for providing a baseline measure of self-esteem, and a quick comparison between the pre- and post-tests. This could be used in the main study without further amendment.

Q sort Provides a richer data set, showing group trends. The ideal-self sort is too complicated. This could be incorporated in the main study using only the perceived-self sort and not the ideal-self sort.

ISI This tool demonstrates the disparity between the real and ideal selves, making up for the non-completion of the ideal-self Q sort. Potential difficulties in generating concepts may be alleviated by embedding this task within general conversation/ interview situation.

Interview This should be included, in order to help tease out bi-polar constructs generated in the ISI. Questions may help to uncover not just changes in self-perception and self-esteem but also the influences of significant others and possible impact of goal orientations on these constructs.

The outcome of the pilot study gave confidence with this range of tools, to take it – with adjustments and additions – into the distance learning forum of the Open University undergraduate programme for the main study. Any shortcomings attributable to the small sample size were intended to be overcome in the main study by the recruitment of a larger number of participants. This pilot study also served to refine the research questions for the main phase of the research. These revised questions are:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable method for investigating such imprecise notions?

The results of the main study are detailed in Chapters 6 to 9; the following chapter introduces the format of the main research study and the sample.

5: Open University study in the context of women's lives

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is in two parts. Part I sets out the timetable adopted for the main study in this research and raises the practical considerations which had to be taken into account. It gives the particulars of how participants were recruited to the study, and outlines issues arising from conducting the research itself. Part II details the composition of the sample. It suggests that this group of students is typical of distance learners as a whole, and thus implies that findings from this research may be generalisable to the wider distance learning population.

Chapter 2, section 2.10 introduced research that suggested that distance education was a form of higher education which alleviated the stresses placed on re-entry students (Castles, 1999). Distance education often suits women's circumstances and meets their needs better than traditional routes to gaining a degree (Willen, 1988). As the sample for this main study was comprised of women students within the Open University (OU) - an institution specifically set up for this mode of learning - it is informative to look at the OU model of distance education; this is the subject of the next section.

Part I

5.2 Distance Education - The Open University model

'Open learning' is a current buzzword, and further indicates the trend towards the democratization of education. According to Paul (1993):

> *The use of the term 'open' admits that education and learning have traditionally been 'closed' by various barriers.* (p115)

A distinction arises not only between conventional and distance teaching institutions, but also between the individual distance teaching institutions themselves, as the latter exist in diverse forms and sizes and operate in many different ways. Consideration will be given here to the Open University (OU) model of distance education. The OU's central mission is to be 'Open as to People, Places, Ideas and Methods'.

5.2.1 People

The initial target of the OU was students who had been 'precluded from achieving their aims through an existing institution of higher education' (Open University Planning Committee 1969, p5), having no academic entry requirements and admitting students on a 'first come, first served' basis. Undergraduate places are limited only by government funding restrictions. Approximately 40% of new undergraduates do not have qualifications below conventional university entry requirements. In 1996/97 there was a total of 47,649 new student reservations for Level 1 undergraduate courses, and 31,004 new reservations were made for study at post Level 1. In 2001, there were 180,000 adults studying with the OU (Open University, 2001). The ratio of male to female students was 45:55, with 50% of students aged between 25 and 49. The OU consciously adopts policies to attract mature students, women, racial minorities and those with non-traditional qualifications.

5.2.2 Places

In distance education or open learning, the institution comes to the student rather than vice versa. This allows access to those in isolated communities, or who have

difficulty attending a conventional educational establishment. It also allows students to study part-time. Indeed, nearly all OU students study part-time and a Graduate Survey showed that 79% of OU students were in paid employment when they started their studies (Open University, 2001).

OU course materials are mailed to students, who follow a study guide and course timetable. Generally, students submit assignments to their tutor by post, which are returned by the same means once they have been marked. Beyond the central base in Milton Keynes, a regional network of study centres, counselling and tutorial services has been established throughout the United Kingdom. This means that students can attend monthly tutorials within reasonable distance of their homes, in order to meet their tutor and other students. Some courses include residential schools, usually held for one week in the summer at universities in the UK. They provide the opportunity to study in depth with other students away from the pressures of everyday life.

5.2.3 Methods

Print, broadcasting and part-time tuition was the original pedagogical model used by the Open University, but the OU continually revises its methods to meet the challenge of national priorities and policies. Courses are developed through a cooperative process, by teams comprised of a mixture of academics, broadcasters, editors, educational technologists and specialist external consultants. Print remains the central course component, but advances in computer technology and accessibility means that more of its courses are available electronically to the 80% of students who have a home computer. The courses provide a variety of devices designed to incorporate interactivity and to help students assess their progress. Multi-media materials are also intended to enrich the students' learning experiences (for example, S103 *Discovering*

Science, a Level 1 undergraduate science course). New technology extends the OU's delivery mechanisms, and allows materials to be kept up to date more easily, with reference to topical issues.

5.2.4 Academic support

Academic advice and support is offered both prior to enrolment and during study. Initially, tutor-counsellors performed this role, but at the end of the 1990s student support became more centrally administered by a Student Support Service. The tutor-counsellor was the tutor of the first course which the student embarked on with the OU, and remained the point of contact for any problems throughout the student's OU career, that were not explicitly course-content related. Whilst many students never drew on their tutor-counsellor, for some it was an important, consistent source of support and advice. The new system has the drawback, however, that each time the Student Support Service is contacted it may be necessary for the student to recap the entire problem.

5.2.5 Financial support

Specialist staff and facilities are available for students with disabilities, and financial difficulties can be eased by spreading the cost over the duration of the course. The estimated average total cost to the UK OU student of fees and other study expenditure is around £4,000 (Source: *Open University Facts and Figures, 1997/98*). This compares favourably with the cost of studying full-time at a conventional university, where annual tuition fees alone are £1,000, and where the opportunities for maintaining a reasonable income are limited. In a recent development, the Higher Education Funding Council for England gave £6.6m additional funding to the OU during the year 1999/2000, to provide fee waivers for undergraduate students who were

on benefit or who became unemployed (Sesame, 1999). This was a result of a campaign by the OU and demonstrates another way in which the OU is able to make participating in education more accessible to adults.

5.2.6 Summary

Through distance learning, the Open University offers some solutions to the barriers faced by mature students, which may help reduce role contagion (see Chapter 2 section 2.3.1). The OU has no entry requirements, offers flexibility of study via printed texts, the media and electronic means, and supports students through its tutors and Student Support Service. No longer unique, the OU has served as a model for the design of institutions in at least a dozen countries as diverse as Venezuela, Pakistan and Iran. (Cerych and Sabatier, 1985), and continues to be a leader in the field of distance education. Since its inception in 1971, almost 250,000 adults have graduated from the OU, degrees for which many students have spent up to or more than six years studying.

Clearly, this is a mode of studying which appeals to the potential student who, for a variety of reasons, is unable to attend conventional university. Identifying and gaining access to an appropriate sample of people is one of the major problems of conducting research (Tobias, 1998); the absence of one specific location that OU students attend means that this exercise is all the more challenging. The next section details the steps taken to recruit a sample for the main study.

5.3 Negotiating access to the participants

5.3.1 Obtaining a database of potential participants

Access to women Open University students had to be negotiated on several levels. First, permission for the study as a whole and access to OU students in particular had to be obtained. A proposal for the project was submitted to the Student Research Project Panel at Milton Keynes, and approval of the study was granted at the beginning of September 2000. As both personal data and responses to questionnaires was to be kept by the researcher on her personal computer, information about the research also had to be submitted to the Data Protection Co-ordinator at the Vice Chancellor's office (*c.f.* Data Protection Act, 1998). This meant the study was registered with the Data Protection Registrar.

At a second level, names of women students – potential participants - had to be obtained. The sample was drawn from the University region geographically closest to the researcher, for practical reasons. Firstly, dealing with just one Regional Office reduced the administrative complexity of the investigation, and, secondly, the pragmatics involved in the researcher travelling to the participants' homes was an important consideration (Debenham, 2001). In early December 2000, staff at the OU's Regional Office for East Anglia were approached, for details of women students. The criteria were that the women should be:

- new to the OU
- starting their first Level One course
- without qualifications beyond A level
- aged 25 years or over

The rationale for these criteria was that the women would be unfamiliar with the demands of degree-level study, with studying at a distance, and with the functioning and

procedures of the OU. It was requested that prospective participants should have not studied within the last 5 years, but this information was not available to personnel at the Regional Office. The main database from which students' names and addresses were drawn was based on the OU's application form, which does not ask for this level of detail.

Administration staff and tutors are understandably protective of their students (Hull, 1995), neither wanting to expose them to additional work, nor to have students feel their privacy is being invaded or their personal details being made freely available. In this way, the staff tutor at the Regional Office quite rightly acted as a 'gatekeeper', deciding whether it was appropriate to disclose information about the students and thus preventing access being gained to them. This gatekeeping mechanism can be seen operating in two directions. In particular, there was reticence to disclose students' telephone numbers; however, further advice from the OU's Marketing Research Co-ordinator gave assurance to the staff tutor that data protection or privacy was not being compromised, and telephone numbers were subsequently released.

In total, the Regional Office supplied 133 names, addresses and telephone numbers. Also provided, as requested, were the details of the OU course to be taken, the student's date of birth and educational level reached previously. Using this list, a letter inviting the students to participate was circulated. However, those aged under 25 years were not contacted (these fell outside the original criteria), as they were thought to be too close to having finished compulsory education. This excluded 33 students. The logistics of meeting up with students within the limited timescale available was also a consideration. Students whose home address was beyond a 40 miles radius from the researcher's base were also not targeted. This excluded a further 8 students.

Finally, agreement to participate had to be granted by the women themselves. The next section details how this was achieved.

5.3.2 Letter of invitation to participate

A letter of 'invitation to participate' was posted to the 92 women who were considered to be potential participants. On the advice of the Marketing department, the letter introduced the researcher, as a former OU undergraduate student and a current OU PhD student. It outlined the purpose and the form of the research; stated the selection criteria for participants; and that only some of those targeted would subsequently be telephoned. Anonymity and confidentiality were also assured. (In subsequent references to particular students, pseudonyms are used.) Academic supervisors also approved this letter, an example of which can be found in Appendix I.

The letter included a tear-off reply slip (and a pre-paid reply envelope) for the student to return if she *did not* wish to participate in the study. This was so that students were positively opting out of the research rather than opting in and was intended that this way, rather than returning the slip if she *did* wish to participate, there would ultimately be a higher take up.

Replies were returned to the Survey Office within The Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University's campus in Milton Keynes. Twenty-three refusals were received at the Survey Office by the end of January 2001. Seven students offered an explanation as to why they felt they could not participate (e.g. family commitments, moving out of the area, withdrawal from course); five of these apologised for not being able to participate. A further two students in addition wrote a note thanking the researcher for approaching them, expressed their regret at not being able to take part in the study, and wished the researcher well with the investigation.

This meant that, even thought they were new to the OU and in many cases to studying and to the idea of participating in research, of the original 92 students who were contacted, three-quarters appeared to be interested in participating, or were not

sufficiently *against* participating to send the reply slip. 'Scholarly' research often fails to achieve good response rates; typically, response rates to questionnaires, for example, are 'low' (Wilson, 1996). Willingness to participate depends to a certain degree on the context in which the respondent is asked to take part; people are more likely to volunteer for research on topics which they consider to have relevance to them. The 75% response rate seen in this research is an encouraging sign, at least of the pertinence of this research to the target population.

One student returned the slip with the 'do' part highlighted and the 'not' part crossed out; two students emailed to register their interest in the study and in taking part; and another telephoned more than once to express her willingness to arrange to see the researcher. Unfortunately, despite her enthusiasm, this latter student was ultimately unable to participate due to her continued very poor health. Clearly, there was a good deal of interest in the research. The women's motives for agreeing in principle to take part was not followed up; this might be an issue worthy of further exploration.

5.3.3 Contacting participants for the pre-test

From the 15th January 2001, the women who had not sent the slip, and thus implicitly stating their willingness to join the study, were telephoned, for a face-to-face meeting to be arranged. Where there was an answerphone at the home telephone number, a message was left, explaining about the research, giving a reminder about the letter, that the researcher would telephone again. The times of day and evening that calls were made varied in order to maximise the chances of finding someone in. Messages were sometime left with partners, mothers or teenaged children. If the Regional Office had supplied a work telephone number, this was used, on the basis that if the student did not wish to be contacted by the OU at work she would not have given

the number on her course application form. From this telephone contact, it transpired that three students had not received the introductory letter. Nevertheless, following further explanation, two of these students agreed to a meeting; the third apologised for being too busy to spare the time. Some telephone details supplied by the Regional Office were incorrect; the student had moved or never been on that number, or the number was simply unobtainable. When contacted, Directory Inquiries were able to supply one different number and the Regional Office also had some updated information supplied by the students themselves.

Despite the Regional Office's and the researcher's own reticence about telephoning, the method of writing to students and then telephoning to find and recruit participants for the research was on the whole satisfactory, and did not pose a threat to students. Over the telephone, only 14 women declined to participate; some were 'non-starters' (i.e. they had already decided not to study with the OU at this point), some stated they had forgotten to return the slip, others stated they were too busy. After some persuasion, one student, Rachel, agreed to participate, but withdrew from the second part of the study, having achieved her aim, stated in the first part of the study, of changing her job for a more satisfying full-time position. Another student stated she would be willing to participate only if the researcher were 'desperate'; her obvious reluctance meant that she was not contacted again. In parallel to the approach needed in an interview situation, inviting students to participate in research also has to be conducted skilfully and with sensitivity, taking care not to overstep the line between persuasion and intimidation. However, even those who did not commit themselves to participating showed an interest in the research, regretted not being able to help and wished the researcher well with the project.

5.3.4 Participants for the pre-test

From the names originally supplied by the Regional Office there were 92 potential participants. However, removing those potential participants who could not be contacted, those who were not taking their course after all, and those who did not wish to participate in the research left a cohort of 37 students. This meant the take-up rate was a disappointing 40%. However, when taking into consideration the original refusers (i.e. those who returned the slip stating they did not wish to participate), non-starters, those who had moved out of the area, and those students who could subsequently not be contacted at all, the take up rate increased to 72%. The table below illustrates these figures and percentages.

Table 5.1: Numbers and percentages of potential and actual participants

Participants							
Potential	**1st refusal**	**New potential**	**Non contacts**	**Non-starters Or moved**	**2nd refusal**	**Actual participants**	
92	23	69	12	6	14	37	
		75%			% of original		40%
					% after 1st refusal		53%
					% after 1st refusal and non contacts		72%

The resulting participants covered a broad range of ages, domestic and employment situations and level of previous qualifications, as Part II of this chapter demonstrates.

It was explained to all the women who were contacted that the research would be conducted in two phases, the 'pre-test' in February and the 'post-test' in September/October, when the women were nearing the end of their courses. Anonymity was assured; when reference is made to participants by name, pseudonyms are used. A list of the participants can be found in Appendix J. The women were also told that even if they had to withdraw from their course, for whatever reason, their

continued participation would be invaluable, and indeed necessary for their 'data' to be included in the ultimate analysis. This two-phased aspect of the research was emphasised again when the researcher actually met the women. The next section outlines the procedure adopted for contacting the participants ahead of the post-test, six months later.

5.3.5 Contacting participants for the post-test

The students had been made aware of the importance of the second meeting, and none of them objected to a return visit. In fact, several women seemed keen to maintain contact with the researcher, to be able to tell her how they had got on in the intervening period. Clare, Teresa and Kathy in particular said they would look forward to seeing the researcher again. Sally said at the first meeting that she was currently in temporary accommodation and Kate anticipated a house move out of the area. Both said they would let the researcher know their new addresses and telephone numbers. In the event, Kate remained at her original address beyond the second phase.

Telephone calls to the students were begun in early September 2001. The majority of the women were easy to contact and to make appointments with for the second meeting. Rachel, who had taken on a new job, this one full-time, was reluctant to spare the time again. Having had to persuade her to participate initially, the researcher was unwilling to press her further. In several cases, the original telephone number was unreliable, being either unobtainable, taken over by a different person or going unanswered. The Regional Office was able to provide the new address and telephone details for Sally, with whom a meeting was arranged after a letter had been sent, and the researcher persisted with an undependable telephone line. Four participants could not be contacted. Using the work telephone number supplied, it was found that

Carol had left her job, and from unanswered calls to her home had presumably moved house; answerphone messages and letters to Celia went unanswered and Joan and Holly also could not be contacted. This meant that 32 women participated in both the first and second phases of the research.

The implication of this reduced number of participants was that the post-test meetings could be arranged over a shorter space of time. All these interviews were conducted within a three and a half week period, between 24th September and 17th October 2001.

5.4 Data collection

5.4.1 Timing of the data collection

The research was designed so that the first meetings should take place before the start dates for the students' courses, which were generally the middle of February 2001. In the event, the bulk of the meetings took place between 23rd January and 15th February 2001, with five scheduled between 22nd and 27th February. This meant that some of the students had actually started their course by the time researcher and student met. Several students, however, had begun their course, whether with trepidation or with enthusiasm, either tentatively or in earnest, before the official start date of their course. This meant that although the intention had been to see all students before they actually began studying, logistics and the students' own enthusiasm led to there being a mixture of those who had not opened their books at all, those who had taken preliminary glances at their course materials and those who had made a proper start.

The second meetings with the participants were planned for seven months later, in mid-September, when the students were coming towards the end of their course. As a few of the women were not available for this second phase (see 5.3.5 above), these

subsequent meetings were timetabled within a shorter space of time. The meetings took place between 24th September and 17th October 2001.

5.4.2 Format and duration of visits to the participants

The data collection procedure followed the format of the pilot study, the first phase of which had been carried out before Christmas 2000, with the addition of a brief informal interview. The participants in the main study were to complete the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) and the Q sort. These 'pencil and paper' tasks would be followed by the interview, within which the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) would be embedded. This was done with the intention of assisting participants to generate bi-polar constructs. The table below shows the format of each meeting.

Table 5.2: Format of each meeting (pre- and post-test)

Introduction of researcher and explanation and purposes of research) pre-test
Collection of demographic information) only
Self Esteem Inventory
Q sort
Interview, including Ideal Self Inventory
Invitation for further comments or questions
Conclusion/wind down

The procedure for each research instrument is outlined in Chapter 3. The pilot study had shown that overall these elements (without the interview) took between an hour and an hour and a half to complete, depending on the speed with which the students applied themselves to the pencil and paper tasks and the amount of information they chose to reveal verbally. Ninety minutes appeared to be the maximum amount of time that could reasonably be expected of the women to spare, bearing in mind their other commitments. Section 5.17 illustrates that ten women had full time paid employment,

in addition to their domestic commitments, and a further 17 worked various part time hours outside the home. Indeed, how long the research would take had been a concern voiced by some students in the initial telephone conversation.

5.5 Location

Having agreed to participate, the students were then asked if the researcher may visit them in their own homes. The reason being that, as the instigator of the research and the person with the vested interest in it, the researcher should be the one to travel to meet the students. It was not expected that the women would come to the researcher's home, although there was no objection to this *per se*. The intention was to inconvenience the participants as little as possible. It was anticipated that not having a neutral base at which to meet might deter some women from going ahead. Taylor (1996) states that power dynamics between the interviewer/interviewee alter according to the location of the encounter, and conducting the research in the private sphere of the participants' homes, as opposed to in the more public arena such as the workplace, gives more control to the participants. This issue of power imbalance is dealt with in paragraph 5.7 below.

One potential participant felt the presence of her family would be an inhibitory factor; she had no access to independent transport so could not go to the researcher's house; and was not keen to be taken to or be met at a neutral base. There was one student, however, who did go to the researcher's house. Her reasoning was that she could easily drive out during her lunch hour (she worked full-time), whereas it would be inconvenient for her to be visited at her at her place of work or at her home. She considered she lived too far away for the researcher to visit in the evening (although another participant who lived in the same village was visited by the researcher, and this

was only half the distance travelled to the furthest student). Nonetheless, the wishes of this student were respected, and the research was conducted at the researcher's own home. Conducting research out of the participants' own environment means that some useful contextual cues are necessarily missing. The next section discusses such insights into the participants.

5.6 Contextual cues

This was another reason for the preference to see students in their own homes: conducting the research within the private sphere would give some insight into the social and environmental context in which the students would be studying. In practice, 36 of the 37 women readily invited the researcher into their homes. In several cases, without prompting, they talked about or showed where they did their studying. Indeed, for the most part, it was obvious that their studying was becoming an integral aspect of their lives, as course materials and pens and paper were very much in evidence in the room where the research took place. 'Home visits' provided first hand evidence about the participants' social context, and the distractions or attractions of studying at home. The research data was collected against a variety of backgrounds: babies crying, toddlers clamouring for attention or repeatedly turning up the volume of the TV against the researcher's and the participant's voices, dogs or cats wanting to be let in or out, washing machines to be seen to, interruptions from telephone calls or unexpected visitors, or peace and quiet.

The hour or so the researcher was with each participant provided a clear indication of the distractions students must contend with when studying from home and underlines the importance of distance learning students being 'self-motivated, inner directed [and] having a zealous desire to learn this thing' (Dressel and Thompson, 1973,

p100). The next section considers another benefit of conducting research in participants' home contexts, that of reducing power imbalances.

5.7 Power issues

5.7.1 Power imbalance

An imbalance of power is often seen in the research or interview situation. Oakley (1993) offers a critique of the established view of the interview procedure, particularly of the hierarchical nature of some interviews, where the dominant researcher exploits the subordinate interviewee. She states that the textbook paradigm of interviewing 'necessitates the *manipulation* of interviewees as objects of study/sources of data' (p223) (emphasis added); the interviewer, 'while friendly and interested, does not get too emotionally involved with the respondent and his (sic) problems' (Moser, 1958, p187-8). By contrast, in this research, the researcher was keen to present herself as someone who, as an OU graduate, was empathetic towards the participants' situations. By coming on to the student's territory, it was hoped to be able to go some way to restoring a more equal relationship between the two parties. Such notions of equality, subjectivity and involvement are seen as 'errors of poor interviewing', going against the paradigm of the 'proper' interview which insists on objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and 'science' (Oakley, *ibid,* p227). Objectivity and detachment on the interviewer's part are perhaps easier to achieve when there is only one meeting between the parties, and, more pertinently, when the research has not been instigated by a personal interest in the topic. Such lack of detachment on the part of the researcher may also be seen in the type of relationships that were evident between the researcher and the participants, as the next section discusses.

5.7.2 The researcher-interviewee relationship

Further evidence that this situation did not conform to the classic interview paradigm comes from the fact that nearly all the women asked the researcher questions. Their questions encompassed both generalities as well as more specific requests for advice regarding studying. They were interested in the researcher's own experiences as student and in the research they were participating in, but also asked about the set up of the OU, clarification of the points system, as well as about time management, essay writing, what to expect at summer school and how to prepare for the exam (if they had one). Some women were particularly interested in knowing about the goals of the research, how the findings would be disseminated, and letting them know findings. Holly was keen to know about the researcher's plans for when the research was finished, and what a PhD is. Fran sought advice about which courses to take in order to get a Psychology degree, and Kathy wanted to know what job opportunities might be available using this type of degree.

Some of this information is available to students in the Undergraduate Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees prospectus and in the Student Handbook. However, the women obviously missed the personal touch of having quite specific questions answered by someone 'in the flesh', at least in the first phase of the research when very few had yet had the chance to attend tutorials to meet their tutor. It was made clear that the experiences and opinions given were the researcher's own, and that formal advice was available from other sources (e.g. the regional office, tutors). However, it seemed that, especially for those who were unable to attend tutorials and therefore lacked the opportunity to develop a relationship with their tutor, they viewed the researcher as a legitimate and reliable source of information.

This could be interpreted as the women solely accepting the goals of the research project, and not entering into a personal relationship with the researcher, nonetheless it appears to indicate that, for some women at least, there was a sense for them that the researcher was not just intruding into their busy lives and extracting data from them. Rather, an attempt had been made to establish 'a collaborative approach to the research which engage[d] both the interviewer and respondent in a joint enterprise' (Oakley, 1993, p231). It also seemed as if some students were inspired by talking to someone who had recently been in a similar situation to themselves. Bev, for example, stated:

What you can do, why can't I do that?

And at the second interview, Sue said that she would like the researcher's 'job'.

None of the students contacted the researcher between the first and second phase of the research, but in several cases at the second phase it was sensed that the women genuinely welcomed the researcher's return visit. Following Kitzenger (1987), the researcher tried to conduct the fieldwork in such a way that women obtained immediate short-term benefits from participating. Although there were a few women who were uncomfortable with the research, the overall impression is that most women did enjoy the experience. Sally was explicit in her pleasure to meet the researcher again. She stated that she had really been looking forward to talking about how she had been getting on over the intervening months, and the progress she felt she had made.

In her essay, Taylor (1996) discusses the relationship and power dynamics encountered when a woman interviews male participants. However, pertinent to the current research is her observation that the reactions of the interviewees to the researcher and the research situation are as much data as anything else that happens in

the interview. This underlines the importance of making notes on aspects of the research beyond the questionnaire and interview responses. The next section discusses this.

5.8 Tape recording and note taking

The formal interview part of the sessions was taped, with the participants' permission. Only one woman, Holly, appeared reticent about this, and was much more forthcoming once the tape recorder (a small, hand-held or table-top model) was turned off. She also of all the participants asked the researcher the most questions, about her experiences and the research. It may be that certain women used question asking as a defensive strategy or to cover up their own nervousness. In many cases, a lot of informative conversation took place whilst the tape was not running. In these instances notes were made as soon as possible once the researcher had left. At the second meeting, the participant's demeanour was gauged and she was asked if what being said before the 'interview' part of the procedure could be recorded; in some cases, the students repeated their comments in order that they could be taped. Handwritten notes of what was not taped also included the researcher's own feelings about the interview and of the students' situation and comments. It was subsequently thought that it would have been more efficient to have recorded onto the tape these subjective impressions, which might then have been fuller, and could have been incorporated at the end of the transcription of each taped session. Nonetheless, these field notes were useful later when carrying out the analysis.

5.9 Issues arising from the research procedure

5.9.1 Success of the letter writing/telephoning method for securing participants

Meetings were arranged with the students on days and times to suit them. They were told that if anything should come up which meant they could not make the arranged time, they should contact the researcher and the appointment could be rescheduled. The women were encouraged to write down the appointment time whilst they were still on the phone and they were given the researcher's telephone number again. Generally this system worked well; three students telephoned to rearrange meetings when family or work demands meant the original time became inconvenient.

In the first phase, there was no reply when the researcher arrived at the homes of two students. When the researcher called on another student at what was thought to be the pre-arranged date and time, the participant said she had forgotten all about it, and did not think she had actually agreed to participate anyway (she did not take part in the research). Given the length of time between the making of some of the appointments and their actual dates, it was decided that those students towards the end of the interview period would be telephoned again nearer the appointment date to remind them. This prevented any more unnecessary journeys, and in the second phase served as a reminder to Sue and Liz, and new arrangements could be made.

5.9.2 Researcher vulnerability

Despite the researcher's unfamiliarity with some of the towns and villages visited, on the whole the participants' houses could be found without difficulty from the directions given. However, some women's other commitments meant that 29% of the first phase and 18% of the second phase meetings were carried out in the evening,

which, given the times of the year, meant locating their houses in the dark. For the most part, this was not problematic, but searching for one participant's house on a particularly wet and windy evening in an unlit rural area gave rise to an awareness of the potential vulnerability of a lone female researcher. Taylor (1996) discusses the issue of the female researcher's personal safety from the perspective of interviewing males, but her comments have relevance to the current research situation. She states that the suppression of personal safety issues within the research write-up is 'most disheartening' (p117) and the potential vulnerability of lone female researchers is not to be trivialised. Personal safety is a taboo area, not to be mentioned in reflexive accounts of research, yet this conspiracy of silence helps to uphold the positivist legacy of the traditional theoretical approach to conducting research.

On practical level, it was ensured, unlike Taylor, that other people knew where the researcher was going each day or evening; a list of names, addresses, telephone numbers and appointment times was left in the researcher's study (and subsequently destroyed) and the researcher also carried a mobile telephone. In the event, there was only the one occasion on which the researcher felt personally vulnerable, but the highlighting of this ensures that personal safety is 'acknowledged as an integral part of the research process' (p122).

5.9.3 Hospitality

One student called upon early in the pre-test phase had completely forgotten about the arranged meeting; nonetheless she made the researcher very welcome, providing coffee whilst she organised herself. This indeed was the general pattern of the fieldwork: the women were very generous in their hospitality. In the pre-test phase 70% of the women offered tea or coffee; towards the end of a further interviews or as

the researcher was leaving, three women realised their 'omission' and apologised for it. In the post-test phase, 74% offered a hot drink of some kind, and in several houses biscuits or cake were also provided. Although this doesn't compare with the 92% offering refreshment that Oakley encountered, it still suggests that the women 'defined the interviewer-interviewee relationship as something which existed beyond the limits of the question-asking and answering' (1993, p232). As detailed in section 5.7.2 above, there was further proof that the women viewed the encounter as an opportunity for them as well as the researcher to gather information. In the majority of cases, the students were keen to ask the researcher questions, about the current research and especially about her own time as an OU undergraduate student.

5.10 Summary

This part of the chapter has introduced the Open University model of distance education. It has detailed how the sample was obtained, given the format of the data collection, and illustrated issues arising from the research situation. These sections have shown that the setting up and carrying out of even a small-scale research project requires considerable effort and reflection. The second part of the chapter now illustrates the composition of the sample in more detail.

Part II

5.11 Introduction

This part of the chapter situates the participants in the current study in context. It illustrates the diversity of backgrounds and personal circumstances of the students who took part by describing them in terms of their previous educational level, their ages and domestic situations. It gives details of the extent of any studying they had

undertaken prior to registering with the OU. It seeks to establish how typical the sample is of mature women students in general and of distance learners within the Open University (OU) in particular. By contextualising the research in this way an assessment can be made about the generalisability of the findings from this particular study.

Grill (1999) states that the typical adult learner is white, middle class, and well-educated, a view concurred with by Bird (2000). Tobias (1998) notes that adult education is primarily a middle class activity serving largely middle class interests; and 'class, gender and race have had a significant impact on the extent and nature of participation by adults in all forms of learning and education'. Adults returning to education clearly are not a homogenous group (Bradburn, 1995; Beinart, 1998). Women studying part- or full-time will be doing so in addition to taking full responsibility for the care of children and the management of a home (Gerson, 1985; Edwards, 1993; Norton, 1998); research often refers to women whose day involves the double shift of paid employment and domestic commitments (Apter, 1995; Lee, 1998). Women registering for distance learning courses are no exception (Willen, 1988). Gibson (1998) reports that the accepted view of the distance learner is someone who is older than the conventional student, female, likely to be employed full-time and married. This part of the chapter compares the sample against these criteria, and the diversity of the participants in the current study quickly becomes apparent. A general overview of the participants is offered first, with a more detailed breakdown commencing at section 5.13.

5.12 Overview of the sample

An issue arising from the pilot study was that of the number of participants. Sample size is always an issue in research; the 'correct' sample size depends on the

purpose of the study and the nature of the population under scrutiny. In traditional psychological research, large numbers of participants would be required, in order that group trends could be identified and generalisations to the populations as a whole made. However, the current research was not set up as a classical psychological study; the emphasis was on the learning experience. However, thirty is the number 'held by many to be the minimum number of cases if the researcher plans to use some form of statistical analysis on the data' (Cohen and Manion, 1980, p101). This sample exceeded that number.

The women who agreed to participate had a variety of backgrounds, experiences and circumstances. They ranged in the formal qualifications they held, their ages and domestic situations. The sample is detailed in Appendix J. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Almost a half, or 46%, of the women who agreed to participate had at least one GCSE but no higher qualifications. The remainder held at least 5 GCSEs or higher qualifications, up to 2 A levels or an equivalent professional qualification. Over a third of all the participants had completed study at some level before starting their OU course. Two students had completed the OU's own pre-degree level 'Openings' preparatory course the year before this study was carried out.

The students ranged in age from 25 to 59 years, with 56% falling within the 30-49 age group. Only one student did not class herself as white and British, but three students (8%) disclosed themselves as having a disability. Sixty-two percent of the sample had dependent children, and 52% of these mothers were single parents. Seven percent of these single mothers also had paid employment outside the home. Seventy-four percent of all mothers had some paid employment. Twenty-two percent of the whole sample reported having no paid work.

This outline suggests a cohort diverse in experience and circumstances. It was characterised, however, by an eagerness and determination within its members to return to study. The literature suggests that the level of educational qualifications obtained before returning to study is an important variable in the profile of re-entry students. This aspect of the current sample will be considered in greater detail in the following section.

5.13 Participants' previous educational qualifications (PEQ)

The OU sets no entry criteria for its undergraduate courses, in terms of previous educational qualifications. It adheres 'to an open admission policy that reflects our belief that everyone should have an equal opportunity to study' (Open University, 2000 p4). Typically, 60% of OU students have the qualifications at A level needed for entrance to a conventional university (Open University, 2001), but the participants in this study covered the range of formal qualifications. The table below compares the previous educational qualifications (PEQ) of the women in this study with the profile of all new OU Level 1 students in 2001 (males and females), whose PEQs did not exceed 2 A levels, or equivalent.

Table 5.3: Participants' previous educational qualifications (PEQ)

	This cohort		2001 intake
PEQ	number	%	%
A	7	19	12
B	2	5	3
C	9	24	21
D	8	22	22
E	1	3	11
F	5	14	7
G	5	14	23
Total	37	100	100

Key

A	No qualifications
B	CSE other than grade 1
C	CSE or GCSE, 4 or fewer subjects
D	CSE or GCSE, 5 or more subjects
E	A level, 1 subject
F	Professional qualification, A level equivalent
G	A level, 2 or more subjects

The highest proportion of women (9, or 24%) fell within the C category, having 4 or fewer subjects at CSE, but this was closely followed by those in D category with 5 or more subjects at this level (8, 22%), and those with no qualifications at all (7, 19%) (category A). Looking at the participants as a whole, however, there was a 50/50 split between those with up to more than 5 subjects at GCSE (categories A to C, 18 women), and those with more than 5 subjects at GCSE (categories D to G, 19 women). In this study, the range of qualifications among the under 35s is similar to that among the over 43s.

According to Grill (1999), one of the features of adult learners is that they are 'well-educated' (p32). If by this it is meant has passed at least one A level, then this cohort is atypical; only 11, or 33%, of these women achieved this distinction. Similarly, in her research with women leaving full-time employment for full-time education, Felmlee (1988) found that those with lower education were less likely than those with higher qualifications to return to college. This is not supported by the current sample; those with lower qualifications are as likely as those with higher qualifications to study with the OU; however, judgements of this nature depend on what the definitions of 'higher' and 'lower' qualifications are. Research carried out worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s, though, found to be misleading the notion that the less successful a person had been a school, the less likely s/he was to take advantage of further education and training (Calder, 1993). However, Felmlee also took into account the costs and benefits associated with leaving paid work to gain further qualifications. Her hypothesis was

based on human capital theory (Becker, 1975), where returning to education is seen as an investment with anticipated returns in the labour market. However, lower wages, lower job prestige and shorter job duration are factors that lower the costs of leaving work and make returning to study more attractive. This is counteracted by lower age and higher ability, which are also incentives to return to education.

However, unlike Felmlee's cohort, the women in the current study were neither embarking on full-time education nor leaving full-time employment. According to Burt (2001), those with 'high' educational qualifications are more likely to proceed from application to the OU to final registration, although the percentage of applicants with high educational qualifications has fallen over the period between the OU's inception to 2000. (The number of applications to courses (not the number of students) in 2000 was 110,207). Burt's definition of 'high' qualifications is HNC/HND, teaching certificate, university diploma, university first degree or above. The sample for the current study, however, was drawn from those women who did not already have a degree.

5.13.1 Family influences on participants' experience of school

The wide range of formal qualifications held by the women was paralleled in their diversity of feelings about their compulsory schooling itself. The perceived unconstructive comments made by teachers still exerted negative influences, even decades later (Hull, 1995). Some participants reported enjoying school and doing well, but others either lost interest or were forced to leave. Discouragement often arose within the private sphere: parents' lack of interest in girls' education, difficulties at home, class bias or the need to earn an income were reasons given for not staying on at school beyond the minimum leaving age.

> *I wasn't allowed. My dad wouldn't let me. I was asked to stay on at school, and my dad wouldn't let me. I was angry about that. That's why I went to night*

school. I was asked to stay on and do English; I used to come first...they rang my dad up. He said 'no, she's a wench, she'll only get married and have children, it'll be a waste'. Viv, 44

Because my mum had a lot of children I used to have a lot of time off to look after her every time she gave birth. And I was in the top class, but you knew you were missing a week here and a week there...I enjoyed some parts of it, but I got no encouragement from my mother. My world was very small. Sarah, 51

I struggled at school, I missed so much of my education....No-one sat me down and said 'you could do this, you could go to University'. No one did that, least of all my own mother...my mother was the biggest person who let me down. Tina, 37

My dad moved around a lot, and with me it always seemed to be exam times we moved. I got so far and got a good grade but then what was the point? We were going to move; I wouldn't bother any more. Tammy, 44

Others who had higher formal qualifications were not so negative in their recollections:

Even though I've got A levels, of a sort, I didn't know whether that would actually indicate I could do this sort of thing. Diane, 49

I did two years post A levels, at B Polytechnic. I don't know why I didn't do a degree... Gill, 41

From his cross-generational study, Gorard, Rees and Fevre (1999) found that qualifications obtained by the end of compulsory schooling are key predictors of subsequent participation in education and training *immediately* after compulsory education, but that they have no effect on the accuracy of predictions of participation in *later* life. However, Grill (1999) suggests that the profile of adult distance learners includes the likelihood that that they will 'not be strangers' (p32) to formal education and the more experience the learners have had with formal education, the greater their

chances of completing the distance learning course. Tuijnman (1991) states that the best single predictor of later participation in education and training is earlier participation.

Indeed, fourteen of the women (38%) in the current study had in fact been engaged in studying with a variety of degrees of formality before embarking on their Level 1 course with the OU. This ranged from a Women's Development course (foisted on Kate by her employer) and alternative medicine (Gill) to GCSE and A levels (Sarah) and an Access course (Viv). Two participants who were nurses were expected to study as part of their ongoing professional development; and one participant had started but not completed an OU Foundation course some years previously. Two participants had completed an OU Openings course in preparation for their 'serious' studying.

5.13.2 Summary

In terms of this cohort's profile, these students appear to be representative of distance learners and OU students in particular. Grill's view (1999), as stated before, is that the typical adult learner is well-educated and middle class. Whilst the aspect of social class was beyond the scope of this study, students did however speak of some barriers they encountered to pursuing higher education at the conventional time, which could be said to be typical of lower-class households. In contrast to Grill, Gibson (1998) suggests that qualitative and anecdotal evidence points to the appeal of distance education to students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. It is this view which this cohort appears to support.

Figures are unavailable as to the percentage of new OU students who have studied before registering for a course with the OU, but more than a third of the participants in this study had been involved in some form of learning before turning to the OU. Such involvement appears to mirror other researchers' findings. These women

had positive experiences of prior learning and those who had heard of the Openings courses but not taken them recognised their usefulness. Previous study serves to 'whet the appetite' and give a taste of what might be in store on another course. Such non-novice learners could be thought of as better prepared, both academically and psychologically, for the demands of degree level study. Clearly, educational preparation (Gibson, 1998) is a valuable motivator. However, did those who had had recent studying experience, whether on an Openings course or elsewhere, also comprise a particular age group? The next section details this cohort's composition in terms of age.

5.14 Age

In this study, four of the participants (11%) were aged between 25 and 29 years and three (8%) aged between 50 and 59 years. 14 were aged between 30 and 39 years (38%), with the remaining 16 aged 40-49 years (38%). The mean age was 39 years and the standard deviation 7.53.

This compares with the age profile of students reserving places on OU Level 1 courses beginning in 2001. Of those new undergraduate students (males and females) 18% were aged 25-29 years; 37% were aged 30-39 years, 19% were aged 40-49 years and 7% were aged 50-59 years (Student Statistics Team, 2002). These figures were not broken down by gender, so a direct comparison between the number of women new undergraduates and women participating in the current study cannot be made, but of the 41,937 registrations for Level 1 courses made in 2001, 56% were from females. The table below contrasts the age of this study's cohort with new undergraduates in 2001.

Table 5.4: Comparison between current study and 2001 new undergraduates

Age (years)	% This study	% 2001 new undergraduates
25-29	4	18
30-39	14	37
40-49	16	19
50-59	8	7
	100	balance below 25 and above 59

Gibson's profile of adult students includes the observation that they are older than conventional students, with an average age of 38.9 years. Willen (1998) concurs that distance learners are older than traditional students, 'most of them over 35' (p94). In this study, the mean age was also 38.9 years, in alignment with Gibson. Twenty-five (66%) of the participants were over 35 years old, thus supporting Willen's findings.

The issue of being older than conventional students was something that had a bearing on the women's approach to studying. For some, the ability to meet the demands of degree level study 'at their age' was a concern.

> *I'm a little bit slow on taking it in, so if they say you need 14 hours, I need 25 hours.* Viv 44

For others, their age was a factor motivating them to start the degree:

> *I'm finding that at my age, in the employment field, there's an expectation, there's a feeling that if you have been educated to degree level, you somehow* ***suddenly*** *qualify for a whole lot of different jobs...* (participant's emphasis) June, 45

> *It was reaching 40, I suddenly thought 'why am I trying to compete with [others]? I've got to be* ***me****'. Go for it now.* Barbara, 43

> *The first 40 years of my life I've spent doing what everyone else wants me to do.....now I'm going to put myself first, and the degree is part and parcel of it* Liz, 40

However, for yet other students, it was the length of time away from studying that was the cause for concern:

> *I haven't studied for 20 odd years. It's a long, long time.* Sue, 38
> *If I had an A level more recently... it's a long gap.* June, 45

Even a younger participant felt that this temporal aspect was against her:

> *I've not been in education for nearly ten years!* Polly, 25

Despite these individual worries, generally non-traditional-age students perform as well as or better than their younger counterparts (Justice and Dornan, 2001; Richardson and Woodley, in press).

The distribution of ages suggests that this is a typical sample of re-entry students. However, in the area of ethnicity, this sample was atypical; this is considered in the next section.

5.15 Ethnicity

Details of ethnic origin were taken from the participants' application forms. There was only one woman in this study who classed herself as other than white and British (Kathy). The self-selecting nature of this research meant that students from different ethnic backgrounds could not be targeted. In 2001, ethic groupings made up approximately 5% of the OU's student population, and the concentration of white participants in this study means that this sample is typical in this respect. However, this goes against the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) statement that 'minority groups appear not to be under-represented in HE' (HEFCE, 1996, p17).

Generally, then, the students began studying within a setting where the culture was familiar to them. Although the OU does not make assumptions about the depth of

individual's academic knowledge, the shared background of student and institution makes for easier assimilation of the course materials. Kathy felt her lack of the same cultural background put her at a slight disadvantage. She said that some of the topics on her course (DD100, *An Introduction to the Social Sciences: Understanding social change*) were quite specific:

> *How it's related to British society, and I haven't lived here for very long. The background, I'm not very familiar with. For some people, maybe, a paragraph, they would be nodding; for me I just don't know about it. Some things, I've seen in the press, I'm familiar with, but other things....At times I don't feel that I'm that involved.*

However, at the second meeting, Kathy said she thought she had learnt a lot about British society from the course:

> *I now understand much more of the background of everyday things in this country, so it's been really useful from that point of view.*

The implication of there being just one non-British and non-white participant is that the study is biased towards a traditional British viewpoint (1 participant was Scottish; there were no Irish or Welsh). Another area in which the participants were, however, typical is that of disability, which the next section considers.

5.16 Disability

Three (8%) of the students in the present study indicated on their registration forms that they had a disability or special needs (1 x dyslexia, 1 x poor health, 1 x unknown). Two further women had conditions which might affect their ability to participate in the course: Sue was slightly agoraphobic, and said she would be unable to

attend face-to-face meetings (tutorials) with other students and their tutor, and Fran had some hearing loss, although she had strategies to compensate for this.

More than 7,000, or over 5% of OU students have special needs or disabilities which make regular attendance at a campus university difficult. The University's policy is:

> *To take all practical steps to enable [disabled students] to participate as fully as possible in all aspects of University life* (Open University, 2001, p5)

and there is a specific disability statement *Open to your Needs*. In HE generally, students with disabilities have low participation rates, for reasons to do with their resourcing and support needs and the severity of their disability (Bird, 2000).

The women in the current study did not perceive their disabilities as insurmountable barriers to studying. However, multiple calls on women's time can be an obstacle when returning to education, as Chapter 2 illustrated. The next section considers the roles into which studying had to be fitted.

5.17 Domestic situation/employment outside the home

Twenty-three out of the 37 participants (62%) had dependent children. A further nine women had adult children, and only 5 (13%) were child-free. Of the 23, 12 (52%) were single parents and seven (58%) of these had paid employment outside the home, ranging from a few hours a week (Celia) to 75% of full-time hours (Tina). Five single parents (41%) reported no paid work. Of the 11 mothers living with a husband or partner, 7 (63%) worked part time and 3 (27%) worked full time hours outside the home. This means that a total of 17 of the 23 mothers (74%) had paid employment.

Only eight of the 37 participants (22%) reported having no paid work outside the home. Consequently, 78% of the total sample had at least a few hours paid work. Gibson states that the distance learner, as well as being female, is likely to be married

and employed full-time. In the current study, 54% of the participants were married or living with a partner. Seventy-four percent of the sample had some paid employment, with 24% of the total working full-time outside the home. In Willen's study (1988), 25% of women distance learning students worked part-time. This compares to 67% of women applicants to the OU in 1996 who were in paid work at the time of their application (Ashby, 1996). The women in the current study were typical in that they had multiple calls on their time, without the added dimension that returning to education brings.

Lewis (1988) stated that 'many returning women are pulled in several (and often conflicting) directions by a seemingly endless stream of demands from work, family, friends and community' (p7), and it would appear that the women in the current study were no less susceptible to external pressures. Their experiences exemplify the situational and dispositional barriers to participating in education that were discussed in Chapter 2. For many women, their social role as family caretakers impedes their goals outside the domestic arena (Willen, 1988); Willen suggests that fewer women than men are able to study without interruption (p94). This prioritising of domestic commitments was cited as a reason for choosing to study with the OU:

> *...because it offers flexibility.* Deb, married, 2 children, works 20%

> *I get these nice gaps in between [part time job], but on Fridays, I don't work at all...so I've got time to get my books out.* Clare, married, 1 child, works part-time.

Some mothers showed a heightened awareness of society's traditional expectations about women's roles, and their dissatisfaction with them:

> *Not everyone's cut out to stay at home with the kids, but you tend to think you should be.* Trish, single parent of 2, works 45%

> *I pass people in the street when I've got several kids with me, and they tut that I must have had these children by different parents (sic). Then I go out in my police uniform and pass the very same people, who give me the utmost respect!*
> Tina, single parent of 1, childminder and Special Constable

Such internalisation of cultural norms meant that for some women, domestic responsibilities took priority over studying:

> *Instead of saying to everyone 'no, I've got to get on with this', I think, 'I'll get the dinner done, tidy up', do [the studying] when they're out in the day.*
> Sarah, adult children, works 80%

The participants in this study are typical of women returning to education in trying to balance the demands of multiple roles. As well as reconciling public opinions about the merits of women returning to education and the ideologies about women's roles, many of the participants in this study also had to deal with the reactions of those within their private sphere.

5.18 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the profile of the women who participated in this research: their previous educational level, ages, ethnicity, disclosure of disabilities, and domestic and employment situations. In many respects, the participants are typical of the 'average' female distance learner or OU student. They fall within the general age range for mature students; with only one exception, they are white and British; they have diverse histories, social situations and motivations. The picture that emerges is of women from all walks of life, whose situations range from the full-time housewife and mother, through the part-time employed single parent of several children, to the child-free full-time working woman. Situationally, there are visible differences between the

women who volunteered to take part in this research, but they are all similarly concerned with balancing their own intellectual needs with the more prosaic demands of home, work and family.

However, the classification of this group as typical of distance learners should, however, be treated with caution; the 'dynamic nature of the individual learner' (Gibson, 1998, p10) makes the building of a generic profile of the mature distance learner difficult. Whilst not a representative cross section of all mature women students, this cohort nonetheless provides the diversity of background and experience typically found within Open University students. This typicality may mean the findings of this study may be broadly generalisable, and may be useful for adding to the understanding of the impact that returning to education has for women within the context of the OU.

What this cohort appears to share is the view that life outcomes have been shaped by, and continue to depend fundamentally on, the educational routes they have taken or are choosing. Central within this is these women's desire, through part-time studying, for self-improvement, especially with regard to self-esteem or self-confidence.

The following chapters give the results of the various parts of the empirical research, starting with the pre-and post-test scores from the Self Esteem Inventory.

6: Results from the main study research tools (1) The Self Esteem Inventory

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings obtained from Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) (1986) for the 31 participants who completed both the pre- and post-tests, conducted in February and October. The chapter illustrates how levels of self-esteem are derived from the Inventory scores. Participants' raw scores are discussed, together with the composition of the pre- and post-test self-esteem groupings. The overall self-esteem results are described and then an analysis is presented with respect to the sample's age and previous educational qualifications.

The Academic self-esteem subscale is of particular relevance to this research. The results from this subscale are also described overall. This chapter also draws attention to the data from those participants who did not complete their course of study. It concludes by considering the value of this particular instrument to this research. It begins, however, by showing how self-esteem levels are determined.

6.2 Levels of Self Esteem

Battle's self-administered instrument is designed to record levels of self-esteem. The Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) contains four subscales containing domain specific items relating to self-esteem, and provides a numerical score of perceived levels of self-esteem. (The SEI can be found in Appendix A.) In the current research, the Inventory was completed by each participant as pre- and post-tests in order that comparisons between the two sets of results could be made (see table 4.2, Chapter 4 and section 5,

Chapter 5). Chapter 3, sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 gave details of this instrument and the procedure for administering and scoring it. Briefly, the maximum overall score achievable is 41, and maximum scores on the General, Social, Personal and Academic subscales are 16, 8, 8 and 9 respectively. Levels of self-esteem for each of the subscales and overall are determined as follows.

Table 6.1: How levels on subscales and overall are determined

		Subscale		
Level	**General**	**Social**	**Personal**	**Academic**
Very high	15 - 16	8	8	9
High	12 - 14	6 - 7	6 - 7	7 - 8
Intermediate	8 - 11	4 - 5	4 - 5	5 - 6
Low	5 - 7	2 - 3	2 - 3	3 - 4
Very low	4	1	1	2

Level	**Overall**
Very high	40 - 41
High	36 - 39
Intermediate	27 - 35
Low	17 - 26
Very low	up to 16

6.3 Results from the pre- and post-test

6.3.1 Overall SEI results

Pre- and post-test scores for each participant are given in Appendix K and table 6.2 on the following page illustrates the number of participants in each esteem level category.

Table 6.2: Pre- and post-test levels of self-esteem

Self-esteem level	Number/percentage of participants			
	Pre-test	%	Post-test	%
Very high	0	0	0	0
High	1	3%	7	23%
Intermediate	17	55%	18	58%
Low	8	26%	6	19%
Very Low	5	16%	0	0
	31	100%	31	100%

The sample as a whole showed a mean increase in their raw scores of 4.26 points (*sd* 3.62). Fourteen out of the 31 students (45%) showed an increase of 5 points or more on their original scores. Thirteen participants (42%) showed an increase of between 1 and 4 points and 4 participants (13%) returned lower post-test raw scores. The trend was for participants' raw scores to increase, as measured by the SEI, in the period between them starting their OU course in February and its completion in October. This suggests that levels of self-esteem for the group as a whole increased over the duration of the study.

Only one participant (3% of the sample) recorded a High pre-test score (i.e. between 36 and 39 points). Most participants (55%) recorded an Intermediate level of self-esteem (between 27 and 35 points) at the pre-test. More than a quarter of the sample (26%) recorded Low levels of self-esteem (between 17 and 26 points), and 5 participants (16%) were rated as Very Low in self-esteem at this point.

At the post-test, however, no participant was rated as Very Low in self-esteem, and 7 participants (23%) were rated as High in self-esteem. As in the pre-test, no participant was rated as Very High (40+ points). In common with the pre-test, though, more than half the participants (58%) received an Intermediate self-esteem rating at the post-test. This suggests that the trend was for overall levels self-esteem to remain fairly stable within the central, intermediate, range. Pre- and post-test increases in the numbers of participants in each self-esteem level was statistically significant for only the Very Low (chi square (1 *df*) = 5.00, $p<0.05$) and the High groupings (chi square (1 *df*) = 4.50,

$p<0.05$). Changes in the composition of these two self-esteem level groups is briefly discussed next.

6.3.2 Movement between the self-esteem levels

All the participants rated as Very Low in self-esteem in the pre-test were rated as Low self-esteem in the post-test, hence there was an increase in self-esteem for this group. The two lowest scorers in the pre-test, Becky and Eve (9 and 10 points respectively), showed some of the greatest gains in the post-test (9 and 8 points respectively). The second greatest gain was shown by Ruth (10 points increase), who also became a Low rather than a Very Low scorer in the post-test. Six of the pre-test Intermediate group joined the one participant who received a High rating at the pre-test, to form the post-test High self-esteem group. None of the participants who achieved a Very Low rating remained at this level in the post-test, and more participants had High self-esteem ratings in the post test compared to the pre-test.

Four participants showed a decrease in scores between the pre- and post-tests. Michie, Glachan and Bray (2001) suggest that an unexpected outcome of returning to education may be the lowering of self-esteem contrasted with higher levels of stress and identity confusion. If academic performance does not match academic self-concept, incongruence results, depressing self-esteem. Even though academic performance may be high, personal feelings of inferiority may take precedence in order to maintain psychological continuity (*ibid*, p458). However, the depression of overall SEI scores in this research was only slight, and not statistically significant, and may be accounted for by issues of test-retest reliability.

Of the 31 participants, 13 (41%) remained in the same pre- and post-test groupings. The raw scores indicate that 18 participants (69% of the sample) increased in overall self-esteem, and there was a significant difference in the composition of the

Very Low and the High overall self-esteem groupings (see previous section). However, it has been suggested that stability of or fluctuations in self-esteem are linked to age (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian and Robinson, 1999). What were the changes between the pre- and post-test overall SEI scores when age is taken into account? The next section considers this.

6.4 Differences in pre- and post-test overall scores and age

The age range of this sample is shown in Appendix J. Four participants were aged between 25 and 29 years, 11 were in the 30-39 years range, 13 were between 40-45 years and 3 in the 46-51 years age range. A table illustrating the composition of the self-esteem groups by age can be found in Appendix K.

Significant increases between individual pre- and post-test overall self-esteem scores were demonstrated by those students in the 30-39 years age bracket ($z= -2.63$, $p<0.01$) and in the 40 to 45 years group ($z= -2.53$, $p<0.01$).

It has been suggested that self-esteem becomes more stable in later life (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian and Robinson, 1999). This does not account for why the significant changes in overall self-esteem scores are seen in the current study with the students in the middle two age brackets (i.e. aged between 30 and 45 years). However, there may be a partial explanation for why the oldest students in this study did not show significant increases in overall self-esteem. Coleman *et al* go on to state that older people attribute failures to external causes, make social comparisons with those doing less well and de-emphasize certain goals for others that are more attainable. That is, older people may reduce the importance they had placed on achieving a degree and focus instead on skills they already have. This relates to the importance of knowing which domains or goals are salient to the individual when measuring self-esteem

(Rosenberg, 1979) (see also section 2.6.1, Chapter 2), and to why this SEI was considered an appropriate tool to employ in this investigation. The self-esteem of an older population is also affected by responses from others, although this is an impact also felt by younger people. This is relevant to this discussion, as this inventory does not address this particular issue of the role of significant others, and therefore underlines the importance of using alternative research instruments which do.

Another factor that may contribute to the lesser impact on self-esteem seen in the older aged participants in this study (i.e. those aged over 45 years) is the stability of self-concepts. Atchley (1991) states that older people can be expected to have a more tested, stable set of processes for managing the self, as well as more robust self-concepts. Stability of self-concept means that older people will make fewer adjustments to their view of themselves than younger people, as the results from this part of the SEI may demonstrate. Although Atchley's comments referred to older people than the participants in the current study, it could be argued that this population demonstrates the more stable self-esteem to which Atchley and Coleman refer. What should not be overlooked, however, is that these external attributions, emphasis switching and stability of self-concept are not passive phenomena; an 'active searching self' still chooses what to select and attend to.

These accounts, though, do not address why there was no significant difference to the youngest students' overall levels of self-esteem. However, to focus on the different experiences of older and younger students within one cohort may be to create a false dichotomy and to fall into the stereotype trap. 'Age stratification has been at the centre of research into re-entry students' (Michie *et al*, 2001, p457); underlying assumptions about age differences and stereotypes about age have frequently provided the basis for descriptions of learners. Schlossberg (1984) suggests that making age 'the central variable' carries some dangers in educational research. Even treating all adult

learners (as opposed to conventional undergraduates) as a distinctive category 'feeds into the ageism of our society and evokes other stereotypes that bear little relation to reality' (p317). For this reason, the term 'mature student' has been avoided in the current research. In the period of transition when re-entry students are adjusting to their new role, rather than focusing interpretations on aspects related to age, situating the student in context by considering their social, family or educational background may shed further light on their learning experience and the impact it has on self-esteem. The next section considers increases in self-esteem as measured by the SEI when the students' level of previous educational qualifications is taken into account.

6.5 Differences in pre- and post-test overall scores and previous educational qualifications (PEQ)

When looking at the average increases in overall SEI score with respect to previous education qualifications (PEQ), some unexpected differences occur. A table illustrating the composition of the self-esteem group by PEQ can be found in Appendix K and the number of participants falling into each PEQ level is illustrated in the table on the following page.

Table 6. 3 Number of participants per PEQ level

Level	PEQ	Number of participants
A	No qualifications	7
B	CSE other than grade 1	2
C	CSE (grade 1), GCSE, 4 or fewer subjects	6
D	GCSE, 5 or more subjects	6
E	1 A level	1
F	professional qualification, A level equivalent	4
G	2+ A levels	5
	total	31

The participants who demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their overall self-esteem were those in groups A ($z= -2.22$, $p<0.05$), C ($z= -1.87$, $p<0.05$) and G ($z= -2.03$, $p<0.05$). Group E was excluded from this analysis as it was comprised of only one student.

It could have been assumed that those with no or the lowest PEQ (group A) would be boosted the most by their achievement over the period of their studies. This may be because recent success in a new venture may serve to diminish negative perceptions of the self. Four of the 7 participants falling into Group A had not been involved in formal education since their schooldays (see Appendix J); this first encounter with learning as an adult may be a contributory factor to the increase in their overall self-esteem.

However, the participants with 4 or fewer CSEs (Group C) and those with 2 or more A levels (Group G) also showed significant increases in their overall self-esteem scores. This cannot be accounted for by the above explanation. To continue the education theme, despite their relative success in school, Group G participants may still have carried ambivalent feelings about themselves, counteracted by studying with the OU. Nonetheless, different factors may be at play here. The SEI could well be not sophisticated enough to uncover these, especially in the case of the Group C students. There appears to be no clear pattern with regard to increases in overall self-esteem and PEQ.

6.6 Summary

The raw results from the Self Esteem Inventory taken as a whole show that the trend was for the women in this study to increase their level of self-esteem over the duration of the research. Analysing the results by age group and PEQ suggested some interesting findings. It appears that the students aged 30–45 years benefited more than the youngest and oldest students, in terms of increased overall self-esteem. However, a more confusing picture emerged when considering the overall results and PEQ.

The appeal of this instrument, however, was its purported ability to discriminate between different domains of self-esteem, hence the General, Personal, Social and Academic subscales. The following section considers the results when analysed by subscale.

6.7 Pre- and post-test subscale changes

Non-parametric tests were carried out on the pre- and post-test subscale scores, in order to establish whether the overall changes to self-esteem recorded by the SEI were accountable for only by chance. Wilcoxon tests indicated that there was a highly significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores on the General subscale ($z= -2.35$, $p<0.01$), a significant difference on the Personal self-esteem subscale ($z = -1.94$, $p<0.05$) and a very highly significant difference on the Academic self-esteem subscale ($z = -4$, $p<0.001$). This latter, Academic, subscale is of particular importance to this research. The next section investigates changes recorded between pre- and post-test scores on the Academic self-esteem subscale in further detail.

6.7.1 Academic self-esteem

Women's educational histories provide them with an image of themselves as learners, an image which persists beyond teenage years. Re-entry students often come to higher education (HE) with negative recollections of their schooldays (McLaren, 1985; Stephenson, 1989), and low grades achieved in the past can translate into a lack of confidence in current academic abilities (Schlossberg, 1984). This feeds into a poor academic self-concept and low academic self-esteem. A high level of self-esteem is a pre-requisite for academic success (White, 1987); there is a negative correlation between self-esteem and academic stress, meaning that those with higher self-esteem suffer less academic (and personal) anxiety. Higher self-esteem individuals may be better able to make use of social resources and employ more effective coping strategies. Given this reasoning, it follows that an increase in overall self-esteem, as measured by the SEI, would be reflected in higher Academic subscale scores.

6.7.2 Academic self-esteem subscale results

The participants' pre-test scores on the Academic self-esteem subscale covered a broad range (i.e. between 1 and 8). No participant scored nil or the maximum 9 on this scale. In the post-test, the Academic self-esteem scores ranged between 4 and the maximum 9. The increase between the two sets of scores ranged between a maximum of 7 to a decrease of 2; the average increase between the two sets of scores was 2.65 (*sd* 2.66). The difference in participants' overall SEI scores is mostly accounted for by their increases in their Academic self-esteem (see Appendix K). Eve, for example showed an increase on the Academic subscale of 7; her overall SEI increase was 8 points. The whole of Kate's overall SEI increase of 7 points was attributable to the change on the Academic subscale. This suggests that academic self-esteem is an important component

of these participants' perceptions of self, and has been particularly affected by events occurring over the duration of the research. Lower overall increases in SEI scores are mirrored in lower Academic subscale changes.

Analysis of overall self-esteem levels revealed differences when results were considered by age and PEQ. However, there was no correlation between the differences in pre- and post-test scores on the four subscales and age (r_s= 0.00, p>0.15) or PEQ (r_s= -.08, p>0.65). Despite the apparently large increases in raw scores on the Academic self-esteem scale, the calculation of correlation co-efficients indicates that the relationship between age or PEQ and changes in academic self-esteem was not related. This may well be a function of the size of this sample. Alternatively, this instrument may not be sufficiently sensitive to detect such a relationship and is an indication that the SEI is adequate only for illuminating the wider picture.

Nonetheless, if success when re-entering education serves to boost levels of overall and academic self-esteem, this then might have implications for the self-esteem levels of participants who did not complete their course of study. The next section considers the results of those who withdrew before the end of their OU course.

6.8 Withdrawers and the SEI

It has already been demonstrated that four participants returned lower post-test SEI scores than pre-test scores. These lower scores did not impact sufficiently to move these participants to lower self-esteem groupings; the slight reduction in scores may be attributable to test-retest reliability. However, were these participants who scored lower in the post-test than in the pre-test also the students who withdrew from their courses? If not, what was the fate, in terms of SEI scores, for those eight students who did withdraw before they had completed their programme of study? This section looks at the outcome for those participants.

Of the four students who received lower post-test scores (Jane, Teresa, Tina and Viv), none withdrew early from their course. The table on the following page shows the eight withdrawers, their ages, PEQs, and their pre- and post-test self-esteem levels.

Table 6.4: Withdrawers, ages, PEQs and pre- and post-test self-esteem level groups

			SEI group	
Participant	**Age years**	**PEQ**	**pre-test**	**post-test**
Fiona	32	A	VL	L
Sue	38	A	VL	L
Ann	28	D	L	I
Polly	25	A	L	I
Jane	36	C	I	I
Liz	40	D	I	I
Pat	43	A	I	I
Val	44	F	I	I

Keys

VL	Very Low
L	Low
I	Intermediate

A	no qualifications
C	CSE (grade1), GCSE fewer than 4
D	GCSE more than 5
F	A level equivalent

This table illustrates that those withdrawing from their OU course ranged in age from 25 to 44 years. Their PEQs also covered a wide spectrum, from none to a professional qualification equivalent to A level. No withdrawer was assigned to the High self-esteem group, but 4 of these participants (50%) showed an upward movement in terms of their pre- and post-test self-esteem grouping. Withdrawing from their course does not appear to have adversely affected these participants' self-esteem levels.

6.9 Conclusion

Analysis of the SEI results revealed some interesting findings. Four out of 5 participants showed an increase in their overall self-esteem scores, with over a third of participants gaining in self-esteem by more than a quarter. For some of these students,

the increase in overall self-esteem scores, as measured by this Inventory, was quite remarkable; however, for just less than half the sample, the gain to them was more modest. Nonetheless, overall this test instrument recorded that over the period of the study, most participants received a boost to their self-esteem points scores. Comparisons between different parts of the sample showed that a significant increase in overall self-esteem was seen in those participants in the 30-39 years and 40-45 years age groups. Significant increases were also in those participants who had no qualifications, fewer than 4 GCSEs or 2 or more A levels.

As might have been anticipated, the increases in scores on the Academic subscale were highly significant, but there was no significant difference when the results of this subscale were analysed by age and PEQ. Withdrawing from their course of study part way through did not appear to have a detrimental effect on those eight participants' ratings of self-esteem.

6.10 Value of the Self Esteem Inventory to this research

The Self Esteem Inventory gave baseline measures of the participants' self-esteem, against which the post-test SEI scores could be compared. Categorising the results either by subscale or by cohort characteristics provided some useful insights, although no straightforward picture emerges. However, how successful has this test instrument been in answering the research questions? These were:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

This instrument has been partially successful in answering the first question. Over the duration of the research, 87% of participants' increased their self-esteem points score. Fifty-eight percent of the participants moved up a self-esteem rating (e.g. from a rating of Very Low to Low, or Low to Intermediate). No participant dropped a level. The statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores on the Academic self-esteem subscale indicates that the participants derived some benefit from returning to study. An explanation for the lack of correlation between pre- and post-test academic self-esteem scores and age or previous educational qualifications may be that the SEI is not sufficiently precise to be able to pinpoint such relationships, or that the sample size was a contributory factor.

This test instrument cannot account for why the recorded increases in self-esteem occurred, if they were in any way related to returning to education. Intuition suggests that re-entering an education environment must have had some impact on academic self-esteem, but the SEI cannot confirm this. The SEI also could not delve into the impact of significant others on changes to self-esteem, and its purpose did not encompass an investigation into the women's goal orientations. These objectives were covered by the other research tools (Q sorting, The Ideal Self Inventory and interviews). The second question, then, has not been addressed by this method. In answer to the third question, the SEI is a partially suitable method in so far as it captures levels of self-esteem, and was successful for highlighting increases on the Academic self-esteem subscale, but it may be more valuable when used in conjunction with the other instruments. Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the findings from the Ideal Self Inventory and the interviews; the next chapter, Chapter 7 discusses the data from the Q sort technique.

7: Results from the Research Tools (2) Q Sorting

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter pointed towards a trend for participants' overall self-esteem to increase over the duration of the academic intervention. The Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) proved a useful tool for measuring pre- and post-test levels of self-esteem. However, this instrument did not indicate the subjective reasoning behind those fluctuations in levels of self-esteem, nor did it offer any insight into the relative importance to the participants of significant others and goal orientation. These are notions central to this thesis. Q sorting was a research method adopted for its potential to uncover participants' subjectivities and delve into the role of significant others and motivations in changing levels of self-esteem. The emphasis of this tool is to provide information regarding group trends.

This chapter discusses the results from the Q sorting tool used in the main study of the research. The background to this method and the procedure followed were detailed in Chapter 3 section 3.7.5, and Chapter 4. A completed sort is shown in Appendix M, together with an explanation. Factor arrays derived from the raw data are illustrated in Appendices N and P. The various accounts that emerged from the participants' sorts are considered. The exemplars, from each account, illustrate the ways in which this cohort of women students viewed themselves prior to and following re-entering education. Findings can be substantiated with reference to information obtained from the participants during general conversation with them or from the interview that followed (see Chapter 3, section 3.12). The findings are compared with those of the SEI and, finally, this section discusses the success of this instrument for addressing the research questions.

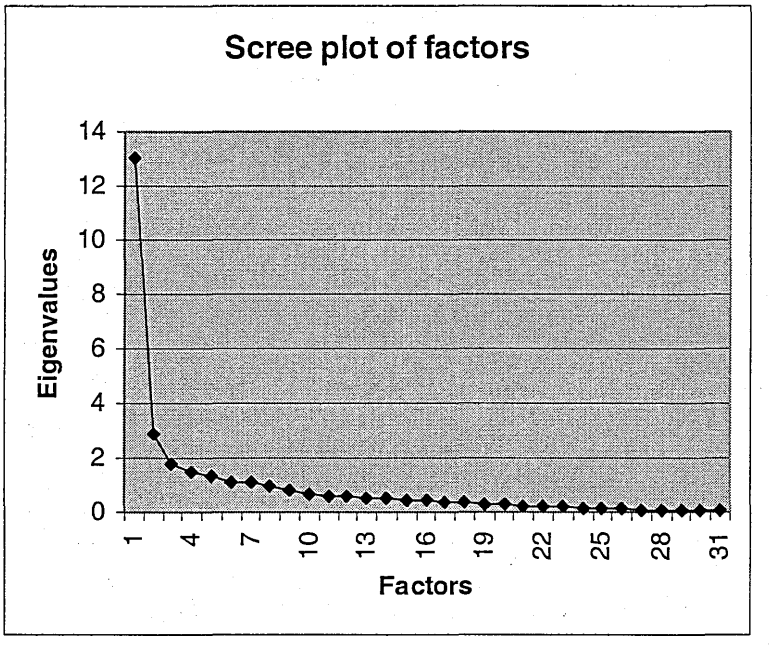
7.2 Factor analysis in Q sorting

The example in Appendix M shows how one individual chose to arrange the Q sort cards and in so doing, demonstrated the relative importance *to her* of the components of the Q sample. However, another purpose of the Q sort is to uncover *similarities* in the way participants completed their sorts. These groupings or factors are important as they provide an aid to explaining subjective yet *shared* feelings about self. Whilst it would be interesting to establish the view that each woman held of herself, that may be a function more appropriate to a counselling or therapeutic environment than to the theory building in a research situation. Despite being based on subjective accounts of self, a particular strength of this tool is that it identifies group trends. This research method facilitates the provision of an analysis of the impact that returning to education has on this group of women's self-esteem or sense of self.

Each of the factors identified represents a view of the self that is shared by the women whose Q sorts loaded significantly on to that factor. The women whose Q sorts grouped on one factor did not sort all the items in an identical way but in a way that is similar in substantial respects. Comparisons can also be made between the pre- and post-test factors. The goal of interpretation is to determine which views or beliefs are held in common by the women whose Q sorts loaded on to a given factor.

Factors were derived by subjecting all the Q sorts to analysis, using PQMethod (PQMethod, 2000). This technique was detailed in Chapter 3, section 3.7.3. The number of factors to be rotated was determined by a scree test. The scree plot for the pre-test is illustrated below.

Figure 7.1: Scree plot of potential factors for pre-test



The Eigenvalues of the first few unrotated factors produce a distinct gradient compared to the plateauing of the other unrotated factors. Although the gradient begins to tail off at the third factor, two factors alone are too few to be rotated. Also, the third factor has an Eigenvalue of 1.76, meaning it meets the first criterion for rotation (i.e. Eigenvalue greater than 1. See section 3.7.3 Chapter 3). This data strongly suggests that three factors should be rotated. Rotation produces a series of correlations or factor loadings between statements and factors.

7.2.1 Factor loadings for the pre-test Q sort

Appendix N illustrates the pre-test factor loadings. June's and Hazel's sorts loaded most significantly on to the positive pole of factor 1. Such exemplars of factors are indicated in Appendix N in bold. There were no participants defining the negative pole, that is, having a low minus score (i.e. –5) on this factor. A score of –5 would indicate expressing the opposing view. Similarly, Sue and Eve define factor 2. Deb was the most representative of a negative pole for this (or indeed any other) factor (that is, she was the least inclined of the sample to show the views expressed by the exemplars

Sue and Eve). However, her score was insufficient for her to be considered as a pure negative representation. Defining sorts are those that have loadings of 0.6 and above (see Stainton Rogers and Curt in section 3.7.4 of Chapter 3). If 0.7 were taken as the cut-off point for defining sorts, factor 3 would have only three defining sorts (Clare, Pat and Paula) and factor 2 would have just one defining sort (Sue). Taking 0.6 as the cut off allows greater insight into the factors' characteristics. Although Fiona's sort loaded on to factor 2, her score was insufficient for her to be considered an exemplar.

Participants June and Hazel, and Sue and Eve were the most typical exemplars of factors 1 and 2 respectively, as they had high positive loadings for one or other of these factors and showed no significant loadings on to other factors. Despite Deb showing the greatest negative score (for factor 2), neither she, Trish, Viv or Kathy showed significant associations with factors 1, 2 or 3. They demonstrated individuality in the way they completed the sorts; theirs are deemed to be 'idiosyncratic' as they have little in common with any other sort and contribute no explanation to any of the three factors.

Each of the three factors represents a conception of self and the relative significance to the participants of the ideas or views on the Q sort cards, held in common by the women whose sorts loaded onto each factor. To make a closer analysis of these conceptions, factor *scores* are derived. The estimation of a factor is arrived at by merging together the Q sorts that are associated with it. For example, Sue, Eve and Polly are highly related; they have emerged on factor 2. By merging the sorts together, what is unique to each woman's sort is expected to be cancelled out, and what is common among them will be prominent. An array for the factor is then produced.

7.2.2 Factor arrays

Using the PQMethod computer program, the scores of these subsets of women were merged. The result of this merger is one Q sort, or array, which is an ideal representation of each factor, with factor scores ranging from +5 to –5. The factor arrays for the first sort are shown in Appendix O.

By looking at the scores for each item within the factors, an account for each factor was produced. The items in the extreme positions (+5, +4, Most like me/Strongly agree; -4, -5, Least like me/Strongly disagree, see Appendix M) were the focus of this interpretation. These are the items, identified by statistical analysis through the PQMethod program, to which participants whose sorts loaded on to that factor showed strong agreement, compared to the other Q sort items.

However, it should be borne in mind that account labels are 'always contestable' (Kitzinger, 1999, p269). According to Kitzenger, though, as long as researchers present the full factor array and the set of Q sort items (see above and Appendix C) 'the adequacy of the researcher's factor interpretation is open to evaluation by the reader' (p269). Additionally, there is the need to ensure that the interpretation of viewpoints or accounts is accurate – is this what participants intended to express? Participants were observed while they were carrying out the sort, and any difficulties in placing the statements or comments they made were noted. Interviews with the participants were also conducted. Transcripts of the interviews with the participants whose sorts were exemplars of each account were used to clarify, check and substantiate the interpretations; see interview data in Chapter 9. Quotations from the interviews are, however, neither random nor representative samples of all the comments made by those participants. The comments were selected 'if they are effective in illustrating the identity account on which that factor is based' (Kitzenger, 1987, p86); they are 'apt illustrations'. The following section gives the results from the pre- and post-test sorts.

7.3 Results from the pre-test sort

This section illustrates the statements or items that typify the three factors for the first sort. An account or interpretation for each factor is offered. Comparisons with the findings of the second sort are made in section 7.8

7.3.1 Account 1: Academic/Confident self

Listed below are the statements that typified factor 1, and their positions in the factor array. The statements allocated to the top and bottom two positions (+5, +4, -5 and –4) were those that were the most representative of this factor, and the ones that the participants whose sorts loaded onto this factor were likely to place in these positions.

Table 7.1: Statements typifying Account 1- Like Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
5	7	I like being female	G
5	2	I am happy most of the time	G
4	44	I am as happy as most people	G
4	12	I am as intelligent as most people	S
5	3	I can do things as well as others	G
5	17	The personal challenge of studying is important	GG
4	10	I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks	G
4	11	Developing new skills is the whole point of studying	GG
4	5	Studying will help me realise my potential	GG

Type: This relates to the Statement type from Battles' Self Esteem Inventory (SEI). Please see Appendix C for the list of Q sort statements and an explanation of types
G General self esteem
S Social self esteem
GG Growth-seeking Goal Orientation (Dweck, 1990)

In this account, statements 'Like Me' were those reflecting general self-esteem and a growth-seeking goal orientation. This account portrayed a self that was content (7, 2), that compared favourably with others (44, 12, 3). There was an underlying sense of competence (10) and of an orientation towards taking on a challenge (17,11).

The following statements were the ones typically placed at the 'Unlike Me' end of the spectrum:

Table 7.2: Statements typifying Account 1 - Unlike Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
-4	23	I often feel I am no good at all	G
-4	29	I often feel ashamed of myself	G
-5	34	I feel I am a failure	G
-5	47	I am definitely lacking in initiative	G
-5	24	At school, I felt a failure	A
-4	46	At school, the teachers thought I wasn't good enough	A
-4	19	There are many people who dislike me	S
-5	55	I'm a disappointment to my parents	SO
-4	33	I'm taking the OU course to keep up with my friends/partner	VG

G General self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
A Academic self-esteem
SO Significant others
VG Validation-seeking Goal Orientation
Explanation of types is given in Appendix C

General self-esteem items also featured at the 'Unlike Me' end of the continuum; however, these were the negatively valenced statements. Participants' sorts loading on to this account were typically indicating that feelings of shame and failure and negative comparisons to others are not their usual experiences (23, 29, 34). Recollections of previous schooling did not have negative connotations (24, 46). Returning to study was not driven by the need to seek validation from others (33). This end of the spectrum was also characterised by a lack of growth-seeking goal orientation statements.

The average age for the 15 women whose sorts loaded on to this account was 39.9 years; their average score on the pre-test SEI was 30.6, giving them an Intermediate self-esteem rating (see table 6.1, chapter 6). The women whose sorts loaded heavily onto this account were positive about previous experiences of education. Within this subgroup, one had a professional qualification equivalent to A level, 3 had 2 or more A levels, and the remaining student had 5 or more GCSEs. As indicated in Appendix N, June, Hazel, Diane, Sarah, Barbara and others defined this account. Sarah and Hazel had both recently been studying, and Diane had completed an Openings course in the summer.

When I went back and done (sic) this A level, I found it easier than I would have done at 16, 17. Sarah

It was brilliant. It did help my confidence. Diane

This may well be an account given by those with previous level of success in an educational environment. Positive experiences in challenging situations, such as re-entering education, and affirmative answers to questions such as 'Can I succeed in this new area? Will I be able to cope with the demands of studying?' (Pals, 1999, p298) increase confidence and facilitate personal growth.

This interpretation appears to be supported by the inclusion in this account of the statements 'I'm not worried about low marks so long as I learn from them' (28/+2) and 'Studying will help me realise my potential' (5/+3). Previous educational experiences may have shown this group that low marks present a learning opportunity, a chance for development, rather than a set-back to personal worth. Equally, this account suggests that, in comparison to others, tasks can be carried out or objectives achieved (3/+5). Such confidence was also demonstrated in the recognition that suggestions or points of view could be aired, and were approved and taken seriously by others ('People like my ideas', 36/2; 'Most people respect my views' 41/+3). Barbara, for example, had little difficulty in asking for time off work to attend Summer School:

[I felt] more confident than I did, or would have done a few years ago.

Also, she was not afraid to speak out:

I don't have a problem contributing in the tutorials.

The above interpretation suggests that these individuals have high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977); that is, they believe that they are capable of fulfilling a specific task. This notion of self-efficacy is related to perceptions of causation, or locus of control. Rotter suggested that there are two types of loci of control (Rotter, 1954), internal or

external. 'Internals' are those who believe they are responsible for what happens to then, whereas 'externals' believe that other people and events beyond their control will impact on life circumstances.

These concepts of locus of control and self-efficacy are relevant to this thesis, as the development of locus of control is attributed by Coopersmith (1967) to socialisation and childrearing-practices - the 'significant others' which the Q sort refers to. Internal locus of control is associated with higher self-motivation and superior academic performance in children (Nowiki, 1973); and Wang (1999) reports that locus of control exerted greater effects on education than did self-esteem. Self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to have high predictive value with regard to educational success; Schunk (1985) found that perceived self-efficacy for learning correlated positively with students' rate of solution of arithmetic problems. In addition, task-specific self-efficacy (TSSE) measures, used in educational research in the USA by Hinsz and Matz (1997), have shown that, compared to the low self-efficacy group, as well as having higher self-esteem, high self-efficacy students had more positive attitudes and higher commitment to tasks.

This is pertinent to this discussion, as learning and performance are particularly affected by an individual's thoughts and feelings related to achievement. These thoughts are reflected, for example, in a certain attributional style, beliefs about self-efficacy, expectations about succeeding and the value an individual places on academic success (Furnham, 1999).

Particularly of note within this factor is the distribution of the statements relating to goal orientation or motivation. Statements reflecting growth-seeking goals (17, 11, 5) featured at the 'Like Me' end of the continuum; correspondingly, a validation-seeking statement (33) was typically placed at the 'Unlike Me' end of the range. The

placing of these items at the extremes of the continuum highlights the importance of motivational factors to the participants whose sorts loaded onto this account.

Summary

This account, represented by factor 1, suggests women who had a positive self-image, a confidence that was reflected in the Intermediate rating allocated in the SEI. The mean age of this group was 39.9 years. High academic and personal self-esteem may have been brought about through success at school or in more recent experiences of studying, as well as by acceptance in everyday life by their peers. Participants whose sorts loaded on to this account appeared to have high self-efficacy and growth-seeking goal orientations. This method was able to highlight the pertinence of motivation to this group of women. Their view of returning to education was as an opportunity for development and growth and potential difficulties were not seen as personal threats. This is in marked contrast to those whose sorts loaded on to the second factor, the account for which follows.

7.3.2 Account 2: Anxious/emotional self

Listed below are the statements that were typical of the second account, their positions in the factor array and their 'type'.

Table 7.3: Statements typifying Account 2 - Like Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
5	32	I'd like to be as happy as others appear to be	G
5	21	I am lacking in self confidence	G
5	6	I spend most of my free time alone	S
5	40	I am often upset about something	P
4	14	I am easily depressed	P
4	20	I am usually tense and anxious	P
4	26	My feelings are easily hurt	P
4	37	I find it difficult when meeting new people	G
4	22	Completing this course will give me more confidence	GG

Type:
G General self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem
GG Growth-seeking goal orientation

In this second account, statements typically placed at the 'Like me' end of the spectrum were those reflecting the categories included within General and Personal self-esteem. These statements all have negative connotations, conveying a self who is upset (40), depressed (14) and tense (20). Acknowledging an unfavourable comparison with others (32) and difficulty when meeting new people (37) contributed to the feeling of a self who is high in anxiety. A lack of confidence was spelled out (21).

Similar negativity was apparent in the statements typically placed at the 'Unlike Me' end of the continuum:

Table 7.4: Statements typifying Account 2 - Unlike Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
-4	41	Most people respect my views	S
-4	53	What my partner thinks has a major impact on what I do	SO
-5	33	I'm taking the OU course to keep up with my friends/partner	VG
-4	4	At school, I was satisfied with my work	A
-4	46	At school, the teachers thought I wasn't good enough	A
-5	35	At school, I liked it when the teacher asked me questions	A
-4	24	At school, I felt a failure	A
-5	43	At school, I did the best I could	A
-5	49	I was proud of my school work	A

Type:
S Social self-esteem
SO Significant Others
VG Validation-seeking Goal Orientation
A Academic self-esteem

In this account, a partner's views may not have a major impact on actions (53); validation–seeking, in terms of keeping up with friends (33), also rated low in this account. However, the self perceives that personal views were not respected (41), and further negative connotations were apparent in four of the remaining five statements. As these five all related to experience of school, this was clearly perceived by the women allocated to this account as an issue of importance. One of these statements (46) conveyed a positive slant on educational experience: the double negative inherent in the

disagreement that the teachers 'thought I wasn't good enough' means that there is acknowledgement that the teachers thought 'I *was* good enough'. Nonetheless, the appearance of statements 4, 35, 43 and 49 at this extreme end of the spectrum suggested a negative perception of previous educational experience.

This account contrasts strongly with the Academic/Confidence account; the self was characterised here by reference to emotions, anxiety, a lack of self-confidence, and negative recollections of schooling. This factor was defined by Sue, Eve and Polly (see Appendix N). These three exemplars scored an average of just 16 points on Battle's SEI (compared to the 30.6 of the Academic Confidence group), or a Very Low self-esteem rating (see table 6.1, Chapter 6). For one exemplar, these feelings of anxiety, about a variety of topics, were openly admitted:

> *My age worried me...it did worry me, to be honest.*
> *It's difficult for me to get [to the tutorial], with my nerves.*
> *[Youngest son at nursery, but] it's way too few hours to do any serious studying.*
> Sue

Research has suggested that the ability to perform tasks is affected by anxiety (Furnham, 1999). This may be reflected in these participants' performance both in the current research and in their courses of study. Withdrawal is discussed in section 7.9.

The exemplars of this account often spoke of the negative influence of others:

> *I wanted to do computer studies, but my boss wouldn't let me. My boss just said 'you'll just go and have babies'.* Eve

> *[Teenaged son] said 'you've got no hope, Mum'. He says 'you're too old and past it'.* Sue

Such lack of encouragement may have exacerbated already lowered self-esteem.

Consideration of what others might think and say also may have impacted on the degree of openness women in this account were willing to show both about their intention to study and the actual carrying out of it:

> *I had a funny reaction from friends and family. My Dad, I wouldn't even tell him.*
>
> *My husband's fine, so long as it doesn't affect him. He'll support me, but very much in a 'if that's what you want to do' kind of way.* Eve

In Eve's case, her studying was conducted when the other family members were out of the house, and books were tidied away and kept from view. The lack of self-confidence (21) is overtly acknowledged by its appearance in the 5/Like Me section of the array.

The participants whose sorts were allocated to this account mostly had no academic qualifications, although one (Becky) had two A levels (her degree studies had been brought to an premature end by an unplanned pregnancy). This group may see returning to education as a way of slaying ghosts. For exemplars of this account (Sue, Eve and Polly), a lack of or limited success at school continues to negatively influence perceptions of ability even almost a quarter of a century later. This is apparent from the interviews, where Sue and Eve spoke about school experiences. Eve's recollection about school and education was that it was very elitist, only certain types of people were considered suitable to continue with education:

> *I stayed in the sixth form for another year and did a couple more O levels, but I was never considered A level material. They said 'you can't stay here, you'll have to leave'.*

A further factor impacting on the women's actual and perceived experiences of education, and their potential competence as mature students, may have been the expressed or implied views of significant others. Parents who endorse traditional gender-role stereotypes 'underestimate their daughters' talent in a male-typed activity

like physics and overestimate their sons' talent' (Hyde and Kling, 2001, p368). This may be equally true when considering educational achievement more broadly. Although the popular view currently is that girls' academic achievement outstrips boys' (Sukhnandan, Lee and Kelleher, 2000; Mitchell and Hirom, 2002), this was not the perception when this sub-group of women were at school. Traditionally, greater emphasis has been placed on the academic achievement of boys. Parental views and more general gender socialization processes may serve, then, to undermine girls'- and women's - self-confidence in their academic ability.

According to Hyde and Kling (2001), expectations for success at a task are 'closely related to self-confidence'. If the women in this group have internalised views regarding their limited competence at the skills associated with learning, they may be starting from a less secure base than the women in the first account who had positive perceptions about their own abilities. Hyde goes on to state that it is not global self-esteem that is the issue here, but 'task-specific self-confidence' (p368). I suggest that what is referred to here is self-efficacy (the belief that one is capable of fulfilling a specific task). As stated in section 7.3.1 of this chapter, the women allocated to the first account appeared to have high self-efficacy; this contrasts with the women in the second account.

A related concept is that of subjective task value. Even if success at a task *is* anticipated, it will not be undertaken unless the individual values it. 'Value' involves components such as interest and usefulness. However, clearly the women in the second account place value on re-entering education; despite lower self-efficacy and lower confidence they are motivated to try. Relating back to the influence of significant others, the issue of stereotype threat may also be relevant when considering these women's levels of self-efficacy. Research on stereotype threat (Brown and Josephs, 1999; Steele, 1997) suggests that a combination of situational factors and internalised

beliefs may influence academic achievement (Hyde, 2001). Girls' perceptions that they were not expected to succeed at school, or that it is 'unfeminine' to achieve academically may be carried over into later life. These women may also then be fearful of success within an education environment or of the implications they perceive it has.

Despite negative recollections of school, the exemplars from this second account placed great importance on gaining education, seeing it as a means to increase their self-confidence (i.e. statement 22 'Completing this course will give me more confidence' was placed in position 4, see table 7.3.) A circular argument is apparent here: by not having qualifications the women feel they lack confidence; education will give them that confidence; lack of confidence makes them wary of what they're taking on. In this account, the perception appears to be that completing the course will bestow more confidence (22); worth will be justified or validated. This links to Dweck's notion of a validation-seeking rather than a growth-seeking goal orientation. For example, for Polly the motivation to return to education may have been partly instrumental (i.e. perceived need to gain qualifications in order to be promoted in her job), but it was also for personal reasons related to approval from her father.

Despite this account comprising women with the lowest average age (32.5 years), there is a tacit acknowledgement, gleaned from the interview transcripts that, in returning to education, the women are going against their culture and against expectations of what is 'normal' for women to want or to do. There is a sense that, by embarking on higher education at an unconventional stage in life, they are placing themselves at great risk (Carney-Crompton, 2002). This issue of risk-taking is all the more remarkable for being seen in this account, one which foregrounds an already heightened sense of personal anxiety.

Summary

This account emphasized aspects of self beyond academic concerns; however, a preoccupation with *negative* experiences of schooling was also apparent. The average age of women whose sorts loaded on to this account was 32.5 years, the youngest of the three groups. The concentration in this account may have been on being or feeling rather than on doing, a more introverted /inward/ reflective/ introspective stance as opposed to the more extroverted/outward looking/positive view of the Academic/confident Self account. The contrast between this account and the Academic/confident one is quite obvious. However, what is generic from the two accounts is:

- Past experience of education
- The role of significant others, and
- Goal orientations

The third account, discussed next, provides a different view of the self.

7.3.3 Factor 3: Mixed account

The third account, whilst varying from the previous two, does not contrast as strongly as the Anxious/emotional account with the Academic/confidence Self account. This third account had several typical statements in common with the first account. Typical statements for this account are listed below.

Table 7.5: Statements typifying Account 3 - Like Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
5	7	I like being female	G
5	2	I am happy most of the time	G
5	44	I am as happy as most people	G
4	10	I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks	G
4	26	My feelings are easily hurt	P
4	12	I am as intelligent as most people	S
5	22	Completing this course will give me more confidence	GG
4	17	The personal challenge of studying is important	GG
4	5	Studying will help me realise my potential	GG

Type:
G General self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
GG Growth-seeking goal orientation

Typical statements common to both account 1 and account 3 were 2, 7, 17, 10, 12 and 44. In this third account, hurt feelings (26) and confidence from completing the course (22) were typical, rather than being able to do things as well as others (3) and developing new skills (11) which were typical in the first account. Like the Academic/confident account, the self in this third account was reflected in General self-esteem and growth-seeking goal orientation items.

A slightly different pattern from that seen in the Academic/confident account, however, emerged in the statements typically placed at the 'Unlike Me' end of the spectrum:

Table 7.6: Statements typifying Account 3 - Unlike Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
-4	4	At school, I was satisfied with my work	A
-4	43	At school, I did the best I could	A
-4	19	There are many people who dislike me	S
-4	20	I am usually tense and anxious	P
-5	14	I am easily depressed	P
-5	29	I oftern feel ashamed of myself	G
-5	23	I often feel no good at all	G
-5	33	I'm taking the OU to keep up with my friends/partner	VG
-4	6	I spend most of my free time alone	S

Type:
A Academic self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem

G General self esteem
VG Validation-seeking goal orientation

Typical statements at this end of the continuum covered the range of self-esteem items, but with mostly General and Academic self-esteem statements. Participants allocated to this account are typically acknowledging that they did not achieve at school as well as they could (4, 43), but that they do not feel worthless (23), ashamed (29) or depressed (14). Similarly to Account 1, returning to study is not driven by the need to seek validation from others (33).

The exemplars for Account 3, Clare, Pat and Paula, showed an average of 28 on the SEI, falling within the intermediate self-esteem level. This is in comparison to the exemplars of Accounts 1 and 2 who showed an average on the SEI of 30.6 (Intermediate self-esteem) and 16 (Very Low self-esteem) respectively. In contrast to Account 1, the exemplars for this third account are less highly qualified. Paula passed 5+ GCSEs whilst at school; Clare left school with less than five GCSEs; and Pat had taken or passed no exams at all. Paula's recollection of school and education was that it was very elitist, only certain people could be entrusted with knowledge:

> *It was very much, when we were at school, 'this is the information that we've got, we'll give you just a few bits of it. I'm keeping it for me; it's really mine but you can have some. But you can only have it if you can really do it'.*

However, Claire 'laid the blame' for lack of academic achievement squarely on herself:

> *I did disastrously at school, through nobody's fault but my own; I just couldn't be bothered.*

Such former uninterest in learning was summed up succinctly by Pat:

> *My biggest ambition unfortunately when I was at school was to leave it.*

The average age of the women allocated to this account was 42 years, making this the oldest age group. Reflecting on academic achievement after a gap of 25 or more years

may colour the perceptions of events and feelings experienced at the time and returning to education may be seen as a way of redressing the balance somewhat, as well as enhancing confidence further (statement 22). Some sort of 'stocktaking' may be taking place. Life regrets often focus on missed opportunities for education and career development (Stewart and Vandewater, 1999). Stewart *et al* suggest that a life review conducted in middle age may be one element of midlife crises (Jung, 1954; Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1996). In his later research with women, Levinson suggested that women in the 'Mid-Life Transition' tried to make new choices at this stage in their lives, although the extent of desired changes was greater for 'homemakers' than for 'career women'. Stewart *et al* suggest that the women who are most likely to have regrets about missed educational opportunities are those who did not take advantage of the opportunities available to them when they were younger (p271). This appears to be supported in the current research, as the students allocated to the Academic/Confident account were, in comparison, those women with higher academic qualifications.

However, acknowledged regrets have a motivational function. The *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1983, p1090) defines *to regret* as 'to remember with a sense of loss; to wish otherwise'; an alternative definition of *regret* is 'unfulfilled or unattainable intentions or desires' (Lecci, Okun and Karoly, 1994). Regret, then, can lead to corrective action; apparently negative thinking may lead to positive action. Rumination about perceived past inadequacies can promote a sense of potential personal efficacy, which the women whose sorts loaded on to this account may have demonstrated.

For the students allocated to this third account, their expectations both of academic success and of their life paths, may have been influenced by the views of women's roles prevalent in their families and wider society at the time they were growing up. The notion that women should be satisfied with raising a family may, paradoxically, exert extra pressure to do well at their studies. Mid life women in these

circumstances may have to justify their need to return to education, as well as succeed at it, and at the same time adhere to internalised cultural expectations regarding women's primary roles in the domestic sphere.

Pressure to conform to others' and their own 'traditional' expectations in addition to pressure to prove themselves academically may make the women allocated to this account more vulnerable to feelings of low confidence than those in the Academic/ confident account. This may be especially true where there is limited or no experience of success within the domain of education. These contradictions were touched on by Paula:

> *Living up to others' expectations is hard, but they didn't expect much of me. So I'm caught in the middle – you want a bit of that [expectations, influence] to give you the impetus to make the best of yourself, but you don't want too much so you feel dragged down by it.*

Summary

This account has many similarities with the first account, the Academic/confident self. General self-esteem and growth-seeking goal orientation items feature strongly at the Like Me end of the Q sort spectrum, suggesting that personal development is a priority for this group of students. Returning to study is not driven by the need to seek validation from others. The exemplars for the Academic/confident account and the Mixed account showed similar average SEI scores, of 30.6 and 28 respectively (both Intermediate levels of self-esteem). This compares with the average SEI score of the exemplars from the Anxious/emotional self account, of 16 points. Also in contrast to the Anxious/emotional self account, the participants loading on to the Mixed account appear to use ruminations about missed educational opportunities as catalysts for change. Regrets, as part of a 'mid-life review' promote feelings of self-efficacy and act as a motivating force. Midlife and any regrets were

placed in the context of women's traditional roles and their personal family cultures. Although having the oldest average age of the three, this sub-group has the mid range of academic qualifications.

7.4 Conclusions from the pre-test sorts

The sorts from the pre-test, completed when the women were just about to start their Open University courses, fall into three patterns. Firstly, there is the Academic/confident self account, suggesting women who have high academic and personal self-esteem. These women appear to be growth-seekers, who view returning to education as a challenge and opportunity for personal development.

The Anxious/emotional self account, on the other hand, suggest women who are nervous in their approach to life and to re-entering education. There is the impression that, although gaining qualifications is seen as a way of potentially overcoming previous perceptions of the self as a poor scholar, embarking on this is a risky enterprise. Validation, rather than personal growth, is an implicit goal. This account is characterised by a sense of personal anxiety.

The final account, in common with the first, has a more positive feel. The self portrayed by this account is one that is not afraid of the challenge that re-entering education brings. Regret regarding academic achievement is used as a motivating force for change, but personal growth rather than validation is an implicit aim.

Statements relating to significant others did not feature highly in any of the three accounts. The difference between the characteristics of the women who compose the accounts can be seen when the mean ages, academic qualifications, self-esteem level as indicated by the SEI and goal orientation are compared. This is illustrated in the following table.

Table 7.7: Mean ages, qualifications and SEI self-esteem levels by pre-test Account

	Mean age (years)	Qualifications	SEI level	Goal orientation
Account 1	39.9 *N* = 15	Professional qualification 1 A level 2 A levels 5 or more GCSEs	Intermediate	Growth-seekers Education as personal development
Account 2	32.5 *N* = 6	None 2 A levels	Very low	Validation-seekers Education for approval
Account 3	42 *N* = 4	4 or fewer GCSEs 5 or more GCSEs	Intermediate	Growth seekers Regret used as motivating force

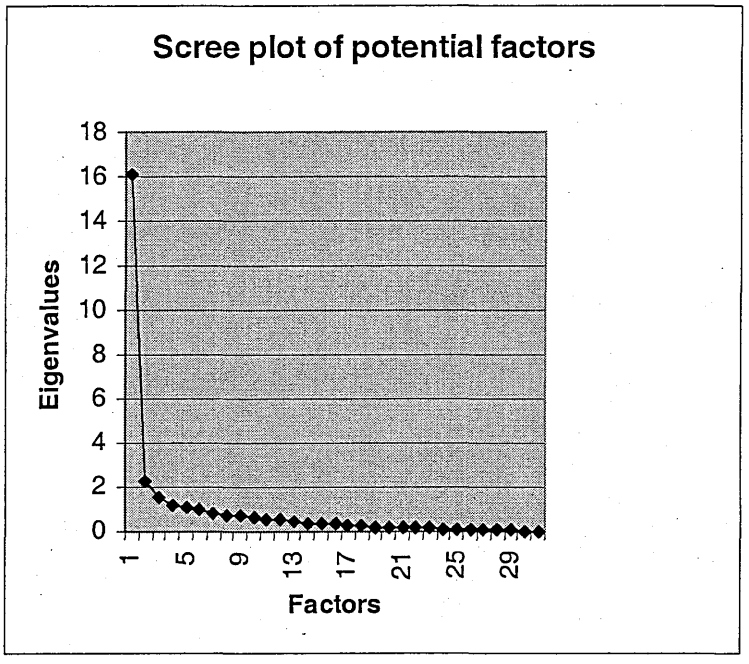
The Q sort, then, showed that although the women had disparate educational, personal and situational backgrounds, their views on the self clustered into three types. This method provided a useful way of differentiating between those views and highlighted differing goal orientations. Although very few statements regarding significant others appeared at either end of the spectrum in any of the factors, the talk of women allocated to account 2 was peppered with references to family members, friends and colleagues. This highlights the pitfall of relying too heavily on a single method of data collection, a point raised in Chapter 3, section 3.6, and the benefit the triangulation of data via the use of multiple methods.

An objective of this research was to compare how or if views about 'self' altered as a result of re-entering education. To this end, the women also completed a post-test sort, when they had completed their OU course. The findings from these sorts are discussed below.

7.5 Results from the post-test sort

The sorts from the post-test were subjected to the same computer analysis as those from the pre-test. A scree plot indicated that again the number of factors to be rotated should be three.

Figure 7.2: Scree plot of potential factors for post-test



The factors resulting from the post-test sort are numbered 4 to 6 to avoid direct comparisons with factors 1 to 3 from the pre-sort. The post-test factor loadings for each participant and factor arrays are presented in Appendices P and Q respectively. Again, in keeping with the findings of Stainton Rogers (1991) and Curt (1994) in Chapter 3, section 3.7.4, defining sorts are those that have loadings of 0.6 and above.

Sorts from Gill, Deb and Hazel load most significantly on to the positive pole of factor 4. Such exemplars of factors are indicated on the table in Appendix O in bold. (Hazel was an exemplar for Account 1; Gill's sort had also loaded on to this account. Deb's had not loaded on to any of the first three accounts.) As in the pre-test sort, there are no participants defining the negative pole (i.e. having a score of -5 for factor 4). Sue and Viv define factor 5, and Kathy and Becky define factor 6. Although Kate's, Paula's, Polly's and Eve's sorts load on to factors 4 and 6, their scores are insufficient for them to be considered exemplars. There were no idiosyncratic sorts in the post-test.

Again an account for each factor was produced, by looking at the scores for each item within the factors. Those items in the extreme positions (+5, +4, Most like me/Strongly agree; -4, -5, Least like me/Strongly disagree columns) were the focus for

these interpretations. These are the items, identified by statistical analysis using the PQMethod program, to which participants whose sorts loaded on to that factor showed strong agreement, compared to the other Q sort items. The following section describes the statements or items that typified the three factors for the post-test sort. An account or interpretation for each factor is offered. Comparisons between the pre- and post-test accounts are made in section 7.8.

7.5.1 Account 4: Positive self

Listed below are the statements that typified factor 4, and their positions in the factor. The statements allocated to the top and bottom two positions (+5, +4, -4 and -5) were those the most representative of this factor, and the ones which the participants whose sorts loaded onto this factor were likely to place in these positions.

Table 7.8: Statements typifying Account 4 – Like Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
4	12	I am as intelligent as most people	S
4	25	I am as strong and healthy as most people	S
4	44	I am as happy as most people	G
5	2	I am happy most of the time	G
5	3	I can do things as well as others	G
5	7	I like being female	G
4	49	I was proud of the work I did with the OU	A
4	5	Studying will help me realise my potential	GG
5	17	The personal challenge of studying is important	GG

Type:
S Social self-esteem
G General self-esteem
A Academic self-esteem
GG Growth-seeking goal orientation

The self reflected by the positioning of statements in this account was one that had a high self-regard (2, 7, 49), and compared favourably with others (12, 25, 44, 3). General self-esteem items were most common but social self-esteem was also brought to the

fore, along with a growth-seeking goal orientation. An Academic self-esteem item (number 5) also featured.

This positive feel was also apparent in the self portrayed by the statements typically placed at the 'Unlike Me' end of the spectrum:

Table 7.9: Statements typifying Account 4 – Unlike Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
-5	24	With the OU, I feel a failure	A
-5	23	I often feel I am no good at all	G
-5	29	I often feel ashamed of myself	G
-5	34	I feel I am a failure	G
-4	47	I am definitely lacking in initiative	G
-4	14	I am easily depressed	P
-4	19	There are many people who dislike me	S
-4	55	I'm a disappointment to my parents	SO
-4	33	I'm taking the OU course to keep up with my friends/partner	VG

Type:
A Academic self-esteem
G General self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
SO Significant others
VG Validation-seeking goal orientation

Confirmation of a self who is positively valued is reflected by disagreement with these negative statements (above). Both academic and general feelings of failure (24 and 34) are typically considered 'Unlike Me', as are feelings connected with shame, depression and unpopularity (29, 14, 19, 55).

Twenty-one of the 31 participants' sorts (68%) loaded on to this post-test account, with Gill, Deb and Hazel being the most representative (see Appendix N). The average self-esteem score, as measured by the post-test SEI, for this sub-group of women was 34 (Intermediate self-esteem; see table 6.1, Chapter 6). The women whose sorts loaded heavily on to this account were positive about themselves, both in relationship to others and to their recent academic experiences.

This interpretation appears to be supported by the inclusion in this account of the statements 'I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks (10/+3) and

'Developing new skills is the whole point of studying' (13/+3). The women allocated to this account demonstrate high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) – the belief that they will succeed at a given task - as well as a growth-seeking goal orientation (Dweck, 1990).

High self-efficacy and internal locus of control (see section 7.3.1) were demonstrated through interviews with the women whose sorts loaded on to this factor. Deb, for example, showed she had taken a lot of trouble to find the right course for herself, before enrolling with the Open University:

> *It wasn't an obvious choice; I searched around a lot. I found [some others] too narrow for me.*

Her belief in herself was confirmed in her willingness to take what she perceived to be the more difficult route to gaining a further qualification, and to set herself challenging goals:

> *[With the OU] I actually have to do more work...I actually like doing exams; I think it's good to work under pressure.*

Typically, women allocated to this account were justifiably proud of their work with the OU (49/+4). Their own recognition of success is reflected also in the appearance of the statement 'With the OU, I feel a failure' at the Unlike Me end of the Q sort spectrum (24/-5).

The orientation towards personal growth rather than validation was also confirmed in the post-test interviews. Hazel said she had taken on the OU course because she was:

> *..looking to go up the career scale...and I think it has helped my personal development too.*

In an emailed answer to the question 'what did you expect to gain from embarking on a degree?' Gill replied simply:

Personal development.

She later stated that studying for a degree:

> *..provides a focus for self-development. Perhaps it does something to enhance self-esteem.*

These responses help confirm that growth rather than validation are motivators for women whose sorts loaded on to this account.

Summary

The self represented by factor 4 is positive and forward looking; the account depicts a self high in self-efficacy and with growth-seeking goal orientations. The women whose sorts load on to this account appear to believe in their ability to succeed in a chosen task; there is an acknowledgment of their competence within the OU environment and that their own efforts have led to this. Effort and development on a personal level are valued over praise and validation from others. An alternative view of the self, however, is advanced by the second post-test sort account. This is discussed next.

7.5.2 Account 5: Ambivalent self

Below are the statements that were typical of the fifth account, together with their positions in the factor array and their 'type'.

Table 7.10: Statements typifying Account 5 – Like Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
4	21	I am lacking in self confidence	G
5	15	There are many things I'd change about myself	G
5	26	My feelings are easily hurt	P
4	20	I am usually tense and anxious	P
4	6	I spend most of my free time alone	S

4	54	The approval of my family, colleagues and tutor is important	SO
4	56	I was concerned the tutor thought I'm not up to it	SO
5	7	I like being female	G
5	11	Developing new skills is the whole point of studying	GG

Type:
G General self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
SO Significant others
GG Growth-seeking goal orientation

In this fifth account, statements typically placed at the 'Like Me' end of the spectrum were those that had negative implications for self-concept. Items reflecting a lack of confidence (21, 15), vulnerability (26, 55) and a desire for approval from others (54, 56) conveyed a sense of a self who was highly anxious (20).

This negative feel, however, was not so prominent at the other end of the spectrum:

Table 7.11: Statements typifying Account 5 – Unlike Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
-4	35	I liked it when the OU tutor asked me questions	A
-5	8	With the OU, I usually gave up when the work was too hard	A
-4	23	I often feel I am no good at all	G
-4	34	I feel I am a failure	G
-5	29	I often feel ashamed of myself	G
-4	18	I am as nice looking as most people	P
-4	19	There are many people who dislike me	S
-5	55	I'm a disappointment to my parents	SO
-5	33	I'm taking the OU course to keep up with my friends/partner	VG

Type:
A Academic self-esteem
G General self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
SO Significant others
VG Validation-seeking goal orientation

Despite unfavourable comparisons to others (18) and not liking giving answers to questions in tutorials (35), the remaining statements suggested a perception of comfort/satisfaction with the self. Feelings connected to failure, shame or unpopularity (34, 29, 19) were considered 'Unlike Me'.

This Ambivalent Self account had several features at the 'Unlike Me' end of the spectrum in common with the Positive Self account (number 4), that is, statements 19, 23, 29, 33, 34 and 55. The Ambivalent Self account differed, however, in that it included statements 8, 35 and 18 at this end of the spectrum, statements which were concerned with reaction to academic challenges and physical appearance, compared to the Positive Self account's inclusion of statements connected to depression (14), failure with the OU (24), and lack of initiative (47).

The greatest contrast between these two accounts, however, was seen at the 'Like Me' end of the spectrum. In comparison to the Positive Self account, the Ambivalent Self account emphasised anxiety. This was also reflected in the lower average points score on the post–test SEI recorded for the participants defining this account, of 21 (Low level of self-esteem) compared to an average of 34 for account 4. Anxiety and lower self-esteem was further exemplified by the participants whose sorts loaded most strongly onto this factor, Sue, Viv and Ruth (see Appendix P).

Sue, for example, was disappointed that she had been unable to meet the demands of her course:

> *It seemed so easy before you started. I was convinced I'd find these hours, no problem. The afternoons, I do it and a few evenings. It doesn't go like that.*

Low self-efficacy was exacerbated by a teenage son:

> *He said I'd be a complete and utter failure and I'd be the worst pupil the teacher had ever come across. He was convinced, "you're doing it all wrong". He'd glance at my essays and that, "you can't write things like this, Mum".*

Despite feeling more confident than at the pre-test, Viv was still unsure of her abilities:

> *I am still finding it a struggle, finding the time. And I am not sure of what I should be putting down.....there is so much course material, it is very hard to get the reading in.....I ended up towards the last three books that we had to go through, just reading about the question I was going to do....*

Such students appeared to find the volume and the content of the course overwhelming, and the fear of failure (or withdrawal) became a reality. The distribution over the Q sort of students who withdrew from their course will be discussed in section 7.10. Dispositional aspects, regarding perceptions of the self as a learner, appear to have been the overriding influence when these women reflected on their experience of studying with the OU. For some women, the view of themselves as a student went against their internalised sex-role stereotype (Schlossberg, 1984). Put downs from significant others coupled with their own low self-efficacy beliefs made overcoming such stereotypes all the more difficult. Although norms have changed somewhat in recent years, these findings support Schlossberg's view (1984) that they may still influence the thinking and behaviour of many middle-aged women, and 'especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds where college-going is not a tradition' (p331).

Although the typical response in this account was to place a growth-seeking goal orientation statement (11) at the Like Me end of the spectrum, and a validation-seeking goal orientation statement (33) at the Unlike Me end, there was an emphasis on seeking approval from others (54 and 56). Such validation-seeking predicts high levels of social anxiety, anxiety about unfamiliar situations and fear of failure (Dweck, 1990, p49). This account suggested a self who was not confident in personal judgments but relied on confirmation of worth from others.

Summary

The self represented by account 5 is one that encompasses ambivalence. Items placed at the Like Me end of the spectrum suggest a self who is lacking in confidence, vulnerable and seeking approval. However, items placed at the Unlike Me end are those related to failure, shame or unpopularity. Despite this, the Ambivalent account

emphasises anxiety, and low self-efficacy and validation-seeking serve to present a more depressed view of the self than the Positive Self account.

Having considered the Positive and Ambivalent Self accounts, the third and final account from the post-test Q sort is discussed next.

7.5.3 Account 6: Contradictory/academic Self

This account had several statements in common with the Positive Self account (number 5), namely statements 2, 7, 12, 25 and 17.

Table 7.12: Statements typifying Account 6 – Like Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
4	2	I am happy most of the time	G
4	10	I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks	G
5	7	I like being female	G
4	12	I am as intelligent as most people	S
5	25	I am as strong and healthy as most people	S
4	48	I worry a lot	P
5	26	My feelings are easily hurt	P
5	42	I am more sensitive than most people	P
4	17	The personal challenge of studying is important	GG

Type:
G General self-esteem
S Social self-esteem
P Personal self-esteem
GG Growth seeking goal orientation

Typical statements in this account were those relating to General and Personal self-esteem, and the typical statements shared with the Positive Self account were those which reflected a self with high self-regard. However, the statements that set this account apart from account 4 were ones which moderated the general upbeat feel (48, 26, 42). The self in this account, portrayed by the statements typically placed at the 'Like Me' end of the spectrum, was one in which some contradictions were apparent.

However, the positive feel was continued in the statements that typified the 'Unlike Me' end of the spectrum.

Table 7.13: Statements typifying Account 6 – Unlike Me

Position	Number	Statement	Type
-5	24	With the OU, I felt a failure	A
-5	39	I often felt like stopping the OU	A
-4	8	With the OU, I usually gave up when the work was too hard	A
-4	46	With the OU, the tutor thought I wasn't good enough	A
-5	57	I'm worried the other students didn't like me	SO
-4	56	I was concerned the tutor thought I wasn't up to it	SO
-5	50	I'm aimed to do well so my tutor wouldn't think badly of me	VG
-4	28	I wasn't worried about low marks so long as I learnt from them	GG
-4	15	There are many things I'd change about myself	G

Type:
A Academic self-esteem
SO Significant others
VG Validation seeking goal orientation
GG Growth seeking goal orientation
G General self-esteem

Here, the emphasis was on Academic self-esteem items and significant others. This was in contrast to the Positive Self account, where General self-esteem items dominated. The self portrayed in account 6 suggested one who had had a positive experience with the OU (24, 39), had confidence in themselves (57, 28) and was self-reliant (56, 50). This positive self-regard was reflected in item 15 'there are many things I'd change about myself' being typical at this end of the spectrum (i.e. there are not many things to change). This statement did not appear in the –5 or – 4 positions of the Positive Self account.

There were only two participants whose sorts loaded strongly on to this Contradictory/ Academic Self account (Kathy and Becky), for whom the average post-test SEI score was 23.5 (a Low self-esteem rating). Having the account defined by just two sorts makes the interpretation less secure; however, some revealing points were made by these participants:

> *[Doing the course] was more fulfilling than I imagined. I felt I also found the assignments harder than I thought I would, but when I was getting my marks back, I was really chuffed. From having nightmares the day before it was due in to actually have got a reasonable mark on each one. It was very fulfilling...It has made me more confident, that I can be where I want to be, not confined to*

> *one thing in life...Studying makes you see how you're going forward and you're not just stuck.* Becky (single parent, no paid work)

Here, this participant demonstrated increasing self-efficacy, the belief that she has the ability to succeed in gaining a degree. For her, studying had made a dramatic impact on her life and self-perception. Becky's score on the SEI had increased by 9 points between the pre- and post-test, sufficient to move her up a self-esteem rating, from Very low to Low. Enhanced self-belief was just one aspect of Becky's overall personal development.

The other participant whose sort loaded on to this account, Kathy, showed an 8 points increase between the two SEI tests; she moved up a self-esteem rating from Low to Intermediate. However, for her, studying itself did not contribute such a large part to her feeling of well-being:

> *The degree as an academic achievement is not important to me, but I think if I do get a degree in x years that what it would mean to me is something very different from a degree I would have got in a conventional way – struggling with family life which I am doing and still trying to achieve everything else as well.* Kathy (married, no children, full-time employed)

Nonetheless, from elsewhere in her interview, it was apparent that personal growth rather than validation was a motivating factor in returning to education. Studying was:

> *...more of a want than a need. It was exploring something that I hadn't explored before...I didn't bother to explain to [her boss why she was doing it] because it's something in my personal life.*

Summary

In common with the Positive Self account, typical statements in account 6 were those that reflected high self-regard; however, these were tempered by the placing of statements that suggested caution. This account was further distinguished from the

Positive Self account by its emphasis on academic-related items, at the 'Unlike Me' end of the spectrum. The women allocated to this account appeared undaunted by the academic challenge they had taken on, and in addition were unconcerned about their tutor's or fellow students' reactions to them. Similarly to the Positive Self account, this account highlighted high self-efficacy and a growth-seeking goal orientation.

7.6 Conclusions from the post-test sorts

The sorts from the post-test, completed when the women had just finished their OU course, fall into three patterns. Firstly, there is the Positive Self account, suggesting women who are high in self-efficacy and with growth-seeking goal orientations. Effort and development on a personal level are valued over praise and validation from others.

In contrast, the Ambivalent Self account suggests women with ambivalent perceptions of themselves. On the one hand, it is an account which highlighted lack of confidence, vulnerability and approval seeking; on the other there was an acknowledgment of success and popularity with peers. The Ambivalent account however, emphasised anxiety, and low self-efficacy and validation-seeking served to present a more depressed view of the self than the Positive Self account.

The Contradictory/academic Self account was similar in some respects to the Positive Self account, in the inclusion of statements reflecting high self-regard. However, unlike the Positive Self account, there was also an emphasis on academic-related items. Nonetheless, the participants allocated to this account appeared to possess high self-efficacy and a growth-seeking goal orientation.

The following section shows how the three accounts from the pre-test sort and from the post-test sort compare.

7.7 Comparison between the pre- and post-test results

Factor analysis of the Q sorts gave three accounts at both the pre- and the post-test stages. Comparison of these and the associated exemplars' pre- and post-test average SEI scores provides some interesting findings.

Table 7.14: Pre- and post-test Accounts, number of participants whose sorts loaded on to each account and their average SEI score/self-esteem levels.

	Pre test		
Factor	**Account**	**Number of participants Sorts loading on**	**Average SEI score/ Self-esteem level**
1	Academic/confident self	15	30.6 Intermediate
2	Anxious/emotional self	6	14.33 Very low
3	Mixed	6	23.5 Low
	Post test		
Factor	**Account**	**Number of participants Sorts loading on**	**Average SEI score/ Self-esteem level**
4	Positive self	23	33.78 Intermediate
5	Ambivalent self	4	21 Low
6	Contradictory/academic self	4	23 Low

In the pre-test sort, there were 4 participants whose sortings were individual enough to exclude them from loading on to any of the three factors. In the post-test, the number of idiosyncratic sorts was nil.

The average SEI scores for each account suggest that the participants sorted the statements in similar ways, according to their level of self-esteem. Those with higher self-esteem as measured by the SEI tended to complete sorts which loaded on to the Academic/confident and Positive Self accounts, and those with lower self-esteem grouped on the Anxious/emotional and Ambivalent accounts. From this, it appears that this tool does discriminate between participants with differing perceptions of their own self-esteem, and that the findings from the Q sort and the SEI support one another.

The different types of accounts at the pre- and post-test suggest that the women were also telling different stories about themselves. That is, what was important to this group of women or the ways in which they perceived themselves shifted over the period

of their studies. In the pre-test, the majority of the women whose sorts loaded on to the account which emphasised academic as well as positive aspects of the self (Account 1); in the post-test an increased majority of women highlighted more general positive aspects of themselves (Account 4).

Similarly, although some women continued to perceive themselves as anxious (Accounts 2 and 5), in the post-test their 'Unlike Me' section included negatively valenced statements, the inherent double negative indicating a positive view of the self (i.e. 'There are many people who dislike me' rated as 'Unlike Me' means that the perception is that 'there are not many people who dislike me'; 'I often feel I am no good' rated as 'Unlike Me' means 'I don't often feel I am no good'). In the pre-test, 'Unlike Me' statements reflected negative experiences of compulsory education. This suggests that, while some women remained unsure of themselves, the intensity of feeling had diminished over the course of the study. Following the trend of the cohort as a whole, these women were reporting a positive change to their perceptions of themselves.

However, two questions arise regarding the composition of the pre- and post-test groups.

1. Are those making up the Academic/confident Self account of the pre-test sort just joined by eight other participants in order to form the Positive Self account of the post-test sort? Alternatively, is there more movement between the groups, with the Ambivalent and Contradictory/academic Self accounts being comprised solely of the former Academic/confident Self exemplars?
2. In addition, is this tool revealing anything about the relationship between returning to education and increases in self-esteem, a primary focus of this research?

The next sections attempt to answer these questions.

7.8 Composition of the account groups

Academic/confident Self and Positive Self accounts

Of the fifteen women who comprised the Academic/confident Self account from the first sort, all appeared in the Positive Self account of the second sort. The original group was indeed supplemented by eight other women. Of these, six had made up the Mixed account. The remaining two women who joined the Positive Self account had previously provided idiosyncratic sorts; that is their sorts did not load on to any of the pre-test three factors.

Anxious/emotional Self and Ambivalent Self accounts

Three of the six women who comprised the Anxious/emotional account of the first sort were allocated to the Ambivalent Self account of the second sort. The remaining three women from the Anxious/emotional Self account made up the Contradictory/ academic Self account. The fourth contributor to this latter account had previously provided an idiosyncratic sort.

Mixed and Contradictory/academic Self accounts

As shown above, all of the six sorts which loaded on to the Mixed account appeared in the second sort in the Positive Self account. Also as shown above, the Contradictory/academic self account was formed by women who had previously made up the Anxious/emotional account, plus a former 'idiosyncratic' sorter.

Idiosyncratic sorts

Of the four women who first provided idiosyncratic sorts, two sorts loaded on to the Positive Self account, one loaded on to the Ambivalent Self account, and the remaining sort loaded on to the Contradictory/academic Self account.

Table 7.15 on the following page diagram summarises visually the relationship between the composition of the pre- and post-test accounts.

Table 7.15: Composition of pre- and post-test accounts

Pre-test				Post-test
Academic Account *n* = 15	1 June			
	2 Hazel			
	3 Diane			
	4 Sarah			
	5 Barbara			
	6 Teresa			
	7 Sally			Positive Account
	8 Jane	W	All to Positive Account	15
	9 Liz	W		6
	10 Lee			2
	11 Ann	W		*n* = 23
	12 Tammy			
	13 Val	W		
	14 Gill			
	15 Maggie			
Anxious Account *n* = 6	16 Sue	W	To Ambivalent Account	
	17 Ruth			
	18 Fiona	W		
	19 Eve			Ambivalent Account
	20 Polly	W	To Contradictory Account	3
	21 Becky			1
				n = 4
Mixed Account *n* = 6	22 Clare			
	23 Pat	W		
	24 Paula		To Positive Account	
	25 Fran			
	26 Kate			
	27 Tina			Contradictory Account
				3
Idiosyncratic *n* = 4	28 Deb		To Positive Account	1
	29 Trish			*n* = 4
	30 Viv		To Ambivalent Account	
	31 Kathy		To Contradictory Account	

W= withdrew from course

It appears that those women who started their course with a positive self-perception and a confident attitude towards studying (Academic/confident self, account 1) maintained these feelings, and indeed capitalised on them. Those who had contributed towards the Mixed account also appeared to increase their self-regard. Although three women from the Anxious/emotional Self account reappeared in the Ambivalent Self account, the other three forming this account in the pre-test sort also

clustered in the Contradictory/academic Self account of the post-test sort, where self-regard could be said to be more positive.

To answer the first question posed at the end of section 7.7: those women in the Academic/confident group were indeed joined by others, already demonstrating high self-regard, to form the post-test Positive Self account. What is less clear from the use of this research tool, however, is the relationship between returning to education and changes in self-esteem.

Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) suggest that, for non-traditional female students, evidence of academic success results in increased self-esteem, role gratification and ego enhancement. This is due to taking on an unfamiliar role. Adjustment to the new demands of student life, the integration of these with ongoing commitments and success in both spheres have positive effects for the individual. Intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivators for returning to education have also been implicated in concomitant enhanced self-perception. The desire for personal enrichment, self improvement and personal growth supersedes extrinsic motivations such as improved job or financial opportunities (Kasworm, 1990). Indeed, at the pre-test interviews, the participants in the current research demonstrated a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators for re-entering education (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.1). However, this analysis of the findings from the Q sorts does not clarify whether the students' motivations for studying shifted more towards intrinsic reasons as they progressed with their courses.

Question 2 at the end of section 7.7 asked if the Q sort revealed anything about the relationship between returning to education and increases in self-esteem. Although the Q sort suggested that these participants' sense of self changed over the duration of the research study, it does not confirm that those changes were as a result of re-entering education. The 'dynamic nature of the individual learner' (Gibson 1998, p10) means

that although re-entering education may be the factor common to all the participants, it is not the *only* event in their lives. Further probing would be necessary to confirm what the catalysts for change were; interviews may be the only way of investigating this. This is further confirmation of the importance of a multiple method approach. The results from the interviews are discussed in Chapter 9.

The increase in the average SEI scores for the women whose sorts loaded on to each account (table 7.15 above) appears to be mirrored in the findings of the Q sort. The shift of emphasis between the pre- and post-test accounts suggests increasing self-esteem for all women. However, not all of the participants saw their course through to the end. This meant that some women completed the post-test Q sort having had only a limited period of study with the OU. They nonetheless demonstrated a change in their perception of self, through their post-test sort. The next section compares the fate of these two sub-groups of women – the completers and the withdrawers - on the Q sort.

7.9 Withdrawers and the Q sort

Eight of the 31 participants withdrew from their course before the post-tests were carried out. The findings from this sub-group of women allowed comparisons to be made with those who had continued with their studies. These withdrawers were Ann, Fiona, Jane, Liz, Pat, Polly, Val and Sue. The table below shows their distribution across the pre- and post-test accounts (this is also shown in table 7.15 above).

Table 7.16: Pre- and post-test positions of withdrawers

Participant	Pre-test account	Post-test account
Jane	Academic/confident	Positive
Liz	Academic/confident	Positive
Ann	Academic/confident	Positive
Val	Academic/confident	Positive
Sue	Anxious/emotional	Ambivalent
Polly	Anxious/emotional	Contradictory/academic
Fiona	Anxious/emotional	Ambivalent
Pat	Mixed	Positive

In the pre-test, four of these participants' sorts loaded on to the Academic/confident account, which highlighted self-efficacy and a growth-seeking goal orientation. Their post-test sorts also placed them in the Positive Self account. Three participants' sorts loaded on to the pre-test Anxious/emotional account, and two of them, Sue and Fiona, appeared in the post-test Ambivalent account. In the post-test, Polly was allocated to the Contradictory/academic account. Pat's sort, on the other hand, loaded firstly on to the Mixed account and subsequently on the Positive self account.

These comparisons between the way in which the sorts of the women who withdrew from their courses loaded on to the pre- and post-test accounts mirror the changes in loadings of the cohort as a whole (see table 7.15 above). Those women who started off with positive self-perceptions maintained them; those with slightly less confidence about themselves enhanced their self-regard, as did Polly from the Anxious/emotional group. The sorts of the remaining two participants, Sue and Fiona, loaded on to the post-test account where self regard was the least positive.

This suggests that withdrawing from a course is not restricted to those who have limited self-regard; nor does withdrawal have a negative impact on self-perception. All the withdrawers appeared at the post-test to have more positive self regard, as did the cohort as a whole. Clearly, it is not the completion of a course of study which may contribute towards enhancing self-esteem; it appears that participation in higher education, for however short a period, may itself be sufficient to foster more positive self-regard. This is an important finding. An inference is that concern over drop-out may be misplaced. Students who withdraw from courses may not achieve as much as the completers, in terms of satisfaction in having stayed the course. However, they may benefit, at least in the short-term, with regard to personal development. Their limited, but positive, encounter with HE may make them more likely to return (again) at a future date, when other circumstances are more favourable. Analysis of student attrition

should not see drop-out in negative terms, but take into account that for many withdrawers, their experience of HE has been a positive one, which they may be likely to repeat. Concerns about attrition should not focus on financial, market-led and institution-centred considerations.

According to Emler (2001), self-esteem and educational attainment are related – but not strongly so (p27). Longitudinal studies have suggested that educational attainment has a small effect on self-esteem, rather than the reverse – self-esteem impacting on attainment. This could be extrapolated to the current research, i.e. that participating in education as a non-traditional student, for however limited at period, may have a positive effect on self-esteem. This is as opposed to those with higher self-esteem being the more likely to re-enter education in the first place.

The results, then are both tentative and provisional – there may be a link between returning to education and increased self-esteem and there may not. Even if there is a correlation, this reveals nothing about the causal relationship that links these observations. Indeed, although the Q sort showed that the stories these women told about themselves differed between embarking on and completing a course of study, it did not uncover what caused those changes.

An important consideration, then, is the value of the Q sort to this research. This is discussed next.

7.10 Value of the Q sort to this research

The Q sort was able to demonstrate how the women's perceptions of themselves changed over the duration of the research, and was particularly valuable for uncovering motivations for returning to study which the Self Esteem Inventory was unable to do. Although the Q sort technique prescribed a framework within which to work, the students' individual beliefs and perspectives on the topic under investigation were

uncovered. Computer analysis showed that these differing viewpoints could nonetheless be categorised according to underlying similarities in the ways the Q sort cards were arranged. The person-centredness nonetheless led to a group-based analysis where certain trends could be identified.

This is a further strength of the Q sort for this research: it produced an ipsative or person-centred description. This is because the women explicitly compared each attribute with other attributes within themselves (Caspi, Block, Klopp, Lynam, Moffit and Southamer-Loeber, 1992). This is in comparison with standard rating scales, such as the SEI, which produced variable-centred descriptions; in the SEI, the women implicitly compared themselves with other people on each attribute. The value of this ipsative approach is that it is consistent with Allport's assertion (1937) that personality (extrapolated to self-esteem) should be described intra- rather than inter-individually.

In addition, such an idiographic approach put the participants in control of the classification process; the emerging categories or accounts were dependent on the participants' responses. It was of value to this research that the groupings were due to the participants and not to the researcher. The use of a pre- and post-test sort demonstrated how the women's viewpoints changed over time. The results from the pre-test were compared with those of the post-test to give a clear indication of how perceptions of self shifted.

This, however, is a sometimes given as a criticism of Q studies: they can be considered as unreliable because they do not produce the same responses when repeated. From a social constructionist viewpoint, however, this is not a problem. Individuals are not *expected* to give the same viewpoint on different occasions; furthermore, the focus is not on individual responses but on the accounts identified. Although the accounts that could be expressed were limited by the statements in the Q

sample and by the number of factors extracted, the accounts which emerged relied on the participants' sortings.

As Stainton Rogers found (1991), for some participants in the current research completing the Q sort was a challenge. Although no-one found it impossible to do (unlike the Ideal Self Inventory, which is discussed in the next chapter), some women wanted to place more of the items/cards towards one or other end of the spectrum than the forced sort grid would allow. Stainton Rogers states that participants may:

> *Have to think very deeply, and face up to the contradictions and complexities in their ideas. What is happening is that they are being asked to do what the researcher usually does during the analysis and interpretation of data – decipher and decide what to do about its ambiguity, lack of clarity and muddled ideas and themes. Participants must choose what is most salient, and how the different statements compare and contrast with each other* (p132).

Whilst this may be demanding for the participants, it is nonetheless a strength of this method that the initial classification was achieved by the women themselves. Opportunities for discussion and clarification arose as a result of difficulties that some women had with the procedure. This is a further indication of the usefulness of this method. The issues arising from discussion will be considered in Chapter 9.

Despite these positive aspects, this method is not without its shortcomings. The objective of this research was to investigate the following questions:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

Although findings from the Q sort suggested that the students' perceptions of self altered in a positive way over the duration of the research, and highlighted motivations

for returning to study, they did not establish any correlation between those changes and the educational process, nor could any causal relationship be examined. Whilst the Q sort was useful for showing the women's viewpoints and *how* they changed, it could not indicate *why* they changed, nor the more precise relationship between self-esteem, significant others and goal orientation.

Despite the assertion that Q studies typically use small sample sizes (Valenta *et al*, 2001) as the method emphasizes the subjective opinion of a population, not how many people share the opinion, there may also be a difficulty with the sample for the current study being *too* small. Block and Robins' Q study (1993), for example, comprised 91 participants, Valenta's comprised 74 participants, Snelling's (1999) comprised 59, and Kitzenger's 41 (1987). This compares with the 31 participants in the current study. However, Senn (1993) successfully completed her research with just 30 participants.

In addition, the topics presented in the Q sample may have been too diverse. Battle's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) statements were taken as a basis for the Q sample, and these were augmented with statements relating to significant others and goal orientation (Dweck, 1990). Attempting to amalgamate the investigation of self-esteem with motivation within the one tool may have been too ambitious and simplistic. On the other hand, the women did not dispute or question the wording or format of the Q sample. In any event, the research was designed so that subsequent interviews could probe any anomalies or ambiguities.

The major criticism of this method, however, is that, in common with the SEI, it did not use the women's own words. Despite its ability to put the participants 'in charge of the classification process' there may have been issues related to self-perception, self-esteem and returning to education that, although salient to the women, were not addressed by the Q sort. As a standalone tool, then, this method would be of

limited value to this research. However, this had been taken into consideration and a further tool, the Ideal Self Inventory, was employed. This is discussed in the following chapter.

7.11 Conclusion

The Q sort method was chosen as a research tool in order to uncover the participants' subjective feelings about themselves. The objective was to gain idiographic perspectives on they way in which self-esteem or self-perception changed over the duration of a course of study. Completing pre- and post-test Q sorts resulted in the formulation of six different accounts of self, organised according to overall similarities in the sorts. These accounts were compared in an attempt to show how more generalised perceptions of self differed between the pre- and post-tests.

The computer-generated accounts showed that in the pre-test, the women's sorts loaded on to three distinct accounts, namely

1. Academic/confident self
2. Anxious/emotional self
3. Mixed self.

Accounts 1 and 3 were similar in many respects, highlighting a self that viewed re-entering education as a challenge. Growth seeking and personal development were issues also highlighted. This was in contrast to account 2, which showed a self constrained by anxiety and seeking validation from others.

The post-test accounts revealed some changes in self-perception. The accounts that emerged from the second sort were summarised as

4. Positive self
5. Ambivalent self
6. Academic self

Accounts were numbered consecutively in an attempt to avoid a direct mapping of accounts 1 and 4, 2 and 5, and 3 and 6 (see section 7.5). The make up of the different accounts appeared to mirror the findings of the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI). The average pre-test SEI score for the women in Accounts 1 and 3 were higher than that of the women in Account 2. This was also true of the post-test findings: women whose sorts loaded on to Accounts 4 and 6 had a higher average post-test SEI score than those loading on to Account 5, although the distinction between average SEI scores for Accounts 5 and 6 was not so marked as between 2 and 3 of the pre-test. These results from the Q sort appear to support those of the SEI, i.e. that the participants' self-esteem increased over the period of the research. Triangulating data in this way adds strength to the findings; the value to the research of the women's talk has already been highlighted.

As well as showing the changes in the type of accounts given at the pre- and post-tests, a comparison was made between the composition of the different accounts. Table 7.15 showed how participants moved between the various groups. The overall trend was for those with high self-esteem and generally positive self-regard to maintain or capitalise on that. Women from the Anxious account (3) also appeared to show positive changes in their perceptions of self. These personal benefits appear to accrue irrespective of whether the course of study was actually completed or merely embarked upon. This is an important finding, relating to the perhaps wrongly focused concern over attrition rates.

An examination of the value of the Q sort method to this research suggested that the ipsative approach of this method nonetheless allowed trends to be identified. Participants were also in control of the classification process on which the analysis was based. Despite the challenging nature of the Q sort, participants were able to complete the task; subsequent interviews provided an opportunity to discuss any issues raised by the women during the sorting process.

A shortcoming of this method, however, is that, although it showed how perceptions of self changed over the duration of the research period, it did not account for how or why those changes arose. Furthermore, the participants may have been constrained by the statements on the cards themselves. Issues particularly pertinent to the women relating to self-perception and self-esteem may not have addressed by the Q sample (for example, June's divorce was known about only via conversation – see Appendix M). It is a failing of this research instrument that it does not use the participants' own words. Overcoming this could be achieved, however, by the use of a further method, the Ideal Self Inventory. This research tool is discussed in the next chapter.

8: Results from the Research Tools (3) The Ideal Self Inventory

8.1 Introduction

This section of the thesis discusses the results from the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) (Norton, Morgan and Thomas 1995) adopted for this stage of the research. This tool, based on a constructivist approach, was designed to counteract the constraining nature of researcher-driven items or statements such as those found in the Self-Esteem Inventory and the Q sort. In the constructivist approach, the conception is that people use active strategies to make sense of their world. Using their own ideas, thoughts and theories based on personal experience, individuals build a model of their environment. This map or blue-print is used to interpret or predict further experiences and to understand the self.

Adopting the ISI technique, pre- and post-test measures were taken in an attempt to chart changes in self-esteem over the course of the students' period of study. A description of the ISI and the procedure for use were given in section 3.5 of Chapter 3, and illustrations of completed grids were given in section 4.7 of Chapter 4. This chapter outlines the results of this stage of the research and offers an analysis of the findings. Because this study was not designed to follow the classical psychological research paradigm, and the research set out to explore perceptions in and of themselves and not in relation to a control group (Mcalister, 1996), particular exemplars' results will be detailed (in this and the following chapter), alongside the group's overall results. Comparisons are made between this tool and the Self Esteem Inventory. Finally, the value of this technique to the research is discussed. Firstly, the issue of generating constructs is discussed.

8.2 Generating constructs

On the face of it, the ISI appeared a straightforward measure. It was considered that completing the SEI and the Q sort would make the participants reflect on themselves and expose them to ideas and concepts related to the self, which would in turn stimulate their own thinking about themselves. However, despite its relative simplicity, many participants found completing the ISI a challenge. This had been anticipated by the performance of the participants in the pilot study (see section 4.7.2 of Chapter 4). For this reason, the ISI was embedded within the interview stage of the main study. It was hoped that talking about themselves and issues surrounding returning to education and self-perception might stimulate the generation of relevant constructs. However, of the 31 women, no participant was able to come up with ten pairs of constructs. Indeed, nine women were unable to generate any pairs of constructs at all. The table below indicates the number of participants generating various amounts of constructs.

Table 8.1: Distribution of pairs of constructs across participants

Number of pairs of constructs	Number of participants
0	9
0.5	6
2	2
3	6
4	1
5	1
6	3
7	3
Total:	31

However, the category who could not think of ideal-self/not-ideal-self pairings could be divided into three subgroups:

1. those (2) who were unable to generate any characteristics at all;
2. those (5) who stated they were quite happy with the way they were; and

3. those (2) who had one broader aim or thought of one skill they would like to acquire (i.e. Hazel wanted to be better educated; Lee wanted to be able to address an audience).

These participants did not give a rating out of seven for these characteristics.

Similarly to type 3 above, a further six participants could think of just one half of the ideal-self/not-ideal-self pairing. These six women were able to name one ideal-self characteristic (e.g. Polly ideally wanted to be 'organised', Maggie ideally wanted to be 'more confident') but could not come up with an associated not ideal-self characteristic. These participants are shown on the above table against '0.5 pairs of constructs'. Conversely, however, these participants were able to rate themselves along the 1-7 continuum. One participant (Gill) who was happy with herself nonetheless generated three ideal-self/not ideal-self pairings. This contentment was reflected in her allocation of the maximum 7 points to each pair of constructs.

This inability to meet the demands of the instrument (i.e. ten pairs of characteristics and a rating along a continuum of one to seven for each pair) meant that a straight comparison between the participants' scores could not be made; an alternative scoring system had to be devised. Converting scores for each participant into percentages meant that relative scores could be compared. Rather than relying on the raw score to determine the level of self-esteem, greater self-esteem would be indicated by a higher percentage score. This quantitative approach means, however, that information with regard to the constructs themselves is lost (Faria Jr, 2002). As an alternative to quantitative analysis, a comparison can be made between the types of constructs generated; such qualitative analysis is discussed in section 8.4. Thus scores from all the pre–test ISI were converted into percentages. These results are discussed in the next section.

8.3 Results from the pre- and post-tests

The scores achieved by the participants on the ISI, converted to percentages, are illustrated in Appendix K. The mean percentage score for the 22 participants who completed any of the pre-test ISI was 59, standard deviation of 17 and range of 65. The pre-test ISI provided a baseline measure against which any changes recorded at the post-test could be measured. The mean percentage score for the 18 participants who completed the post-test ISI was 72, standard deviation of 15.96, and range of 57.

Four of the participants did not show any increase in self-esteem, as measured by the ISI. A further four participants did not give a numerical rating, nonetheless, they stated they had increased in confidence. These were four of the six women who had generated only one ideal-self characteristic and no corresponding not-ideal-self pair at the pre-test. The remaining 15 women showed increases in their ISI scores. These varied from a slight change of 02 (Jane) to larger increase of 29 (Ruth) percentage points. No participant recorded a decrease of self-esteem on this measure. An illustration of how changes in scores between the pre- and post-test might come about were illustrated in section 4.7.1 of Chapter 4.

Despite each grid being comprised of concept pairings idiosyncratic to each participant, the different words used disguised underlying similarities. The next section considers the topics common to the women's ISIs, before, in section 8.5 the overall findings from this instrument are discussed.

8.4 Themes within the construct pairings

It has already been demonstrated that quantitative differences emerged from the completed ISIs. Such a range of scores achieved, for example from 35% to 100% in the pre-test, confirms that the women perceived themselves in different ways. Qualitative

variations, however, were also apparent in the constructs elicited and serve to underline the diverse understanding and interpretation of the term 'self-perception' by the participants. This is evident by the following examples of constructs elicited:

Centred – surrounded by chaos of own making	Teresa
Sense of achievement - failure	Trish
Skilled, trained - unskilled (unemployable)	Sally
Generous - uncharitable	Gill
Stronger Christian - no faith at all	Sue
Longer attention span - short attention span	Tammy

However, despite the very individual nature of the terms used by the participants, further analysis shows that the constructs generated can be collapsed into three broad categories. These can be summarised as:

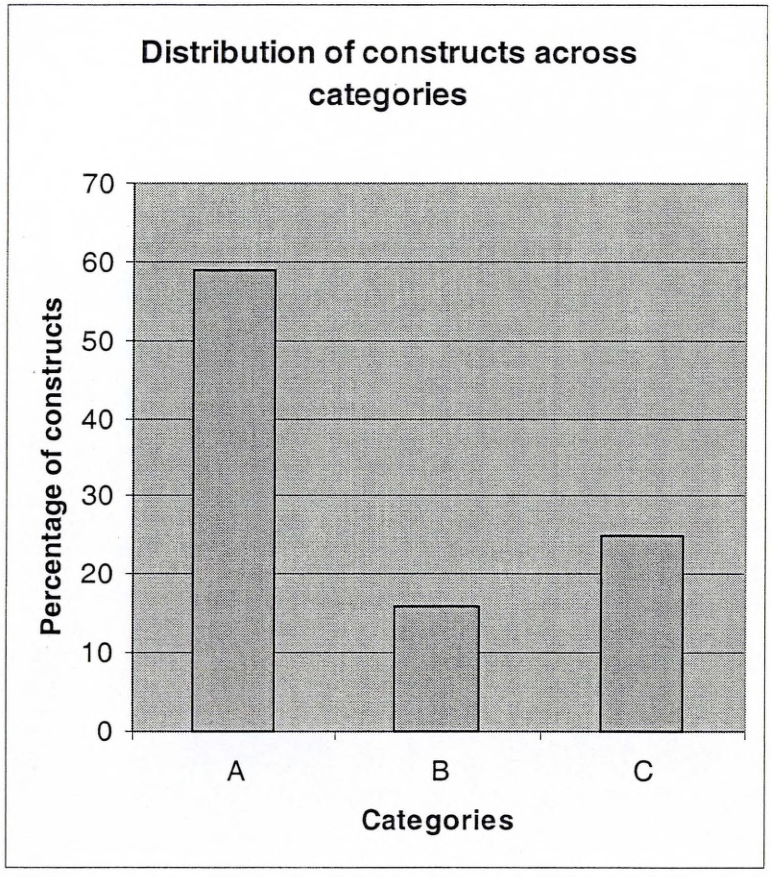
- Intrapersonal traits and skills
- Interpersonal roles/relationships
- Academic/employment related aspects

An example from each of these would be as follows:

- Calmer-anxious (Teresa)
- More choice-stuck in unsuitable role (Becky)
- More skilled/trained-untrained regarding work (Sally)

The distribution of constructs across the categories is shown in the figure on the following page.

Figure 8.1: Percentage distribution of constructs across categories



Intrapersonal skills/traits	A
Interpersonal	B
Academic/employment	C

Fewest constructs (16%) were related to interpersonal considerations, and a quarter emphasised academic/employment concerns (25%). However, the predominant category of constructs was that of intrapersonal traits or skills; 59% of constructs were concerned with this aspect. Clearly, from the constructs that they were able to generate, the women were thinking mostly in terms of psychological traits or characteristics relating to themselves. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the demands of the task. Nonetheless, the depressed number of interpersonal traits is striking; why should there be so much less reference to these types of concepts?

Given that females are socialised to get along (Block and Robins, 1993), it is perhaps surprising that so few of the ideal-self traits generated by the participants related to interpersonal or family aspects or to women's traditional roles. Only two women

(Becky and Trish, both single parents) named constructs specifically associated with their role as a mother. Although others' constructs were related to selflessness, greater emphasis within the interpersonal category was placed on sociability and pursuing opportunities outside the home. However, the fact that these women are all re-entry students may mean that their aspirations have already been lifted beyond the purely domestic sphere. As stated earlier (Chapter 5, section 5.17), 78% of the participants were employed outside the home; their sense of self therefore already encompassed multiple perspectives. Embarking on a course of study also brings with it alternative possibilities for the self and for identity; the participants were undoubtedly conscious of new opportunities open to them. Studying itself would expose them to new ideas and in addition, a different future might be available as a result of studying. The desire for this broader perspective is reflected in constructs that related to the acquisition of new academic skills, skills that have a use beyond the educational environment. Although some women stated they were studying purely for its intrinsic value, a sub-text is the desire for self-improvement in terms of economic power.

Empowerment is an issue often associated with women returning to education (Burge and Lenskyj, 1990; Morley and Walsh, 1996). Nowhere is this idea of empowerment, brought about through increased confidence, more visible than in the intrapersonal sub-category of the ISI analysis. Rather than highlighting the participants' concerns regarding self-esteem, the ISI may have uncovered a preoccupation with a more tangible concept – that of confidence. The next section considers the appearance in the ISI of constructs related to this notion.

8.4.1 The construct of confidence

Closer inspection of the constructs reveals confidence as a major theme. 20% of all the constructs and 33% of the intrapersonal sub-category constructs were directly

concerned with confidence. The remaining two thirds of the intrapersonal category reflected broad personal attributes such as patience, feeling peaceful or relaxed, or concerns with physical appearance or spirituality. This characteristic of confidence was generated by 15, or 48%, of all 31 women. Taking just the 22 who completed the ISI, this figure rises to 68%. 'Confidence' did not appear in the ISIs of the remaining seven women who were able to generate some constructs. However, of the six women who could think of only one ideal-self characteristic, all except Polly cited increased confidence as their ideal. Greater confidence was also desired by both women who could generate only two ideal-self characteristics. For 13 of the 15 women, 'confidence' was the only, the first or the second characteristic they came up with. Clearly, the issue of confidence is salient for these participants.

'Confidence, its acquisition or retention, appears to play a key role' (Calder, 1993, p132) within the mature student experience. However, each participant's conception of confidence may be different. For some women, the confidence they sought was in the form of social competence. Other women wanted confidence in their academic abilities, both in terms of the acquisition and the imparting of knowledge. Yet others wanted the confidence other people thought they had to be genuine, rather than a front. This relates to the Impostor Phenomenon (Clance and Imes, 1978; Sonnak, 2001) introduced in Chapter 4, section 4.7.2.

The notion of confidence, then, has different meanings for individuals and, within the academic literature, is also conceived of in a variety of ways (Stephenson and Percy, 1989). 'Confidence' can be related to:

- Self-confidence
- Confidence in formal learning situations
- Confidence in intellectual capacity
- Confidence in expressing opinions

- Confidence in life and work situations

Nonetheless, it follows that these different interpretations of confidence are necessary, reflecting the diverse situations and needs of students generally and of those in this particular study. An acknowledgement of a current lack of confidence or the desire to increase confidence was in the forefront of these women students' minds. It appears that, for some women at least, returning to education is considered a means by which greater confidence, in whatever form, can be acquired. Although both the SEI and Q sort included statements regarding confidence, it is via the ISI that its particular relevance has been highlighted. Confidence appears a fundamental attribute that these women wish to possess.

This specific issue of confidence – and *increased* confidence - will be returned to in Chapter 9. The following section, however, discusses the general findings from the ISI.

8.5 Overall findings

The results illustrated in sections 8.3 and 8.4 and in Appendix K indicated that the participants moved along the ISI continuum towards their ideal-self. Following the rationale for the test instrument, this means that their self-esteem has increased. Statistical analysis suggests that the difference between the pre- and post-test ISI scores was highly significant ($z=-3.312$, $p<.001$). There was, however, no statistically significant correlation between the magnitude of these differences and the participants' ages or previous educational qualifications (PEQs).

Participants' demonstration that the way in which they perceived themselves had shifted, albeit in some cases only slightly, over the duration of the research, may not however, be confined to self-esteem. The greater post-test ISI percentage scores suggest that *something* increased, but that something may not have been self-esteem *per se*.

Analysis of the constructs generated shows that increasing confidence was a major goal for many of these women. Nonetheless, the general trend was towards personal growth of a more distributed nature. Increased confidence may be only one aspect of importance across the spectrum of personal development.

Morgan (1991) suggested that adults re-entering education demonstrate broad changes, and in particular with regard to a new sense of self-development. He comments on some students talking about 'a new awareness and seeing themselves and things differently' (p86); this appears to be manifested in the current research, by women's shifts along the ISI continuum. A similar but more dramatic example of change brought about by re-entering education was also highlighted by Morgan: students developed as people, which incorporated a 'fundamental change' about themselves. This shift in personal perception was apparent in the present research from the subsequent interviews, in particular for one student, Sally. Interestingly, however, this was not reflected in her ISI scores. This and other findings from the interviews are discussed in the next chapter.

Some women, however, could not generate any ideal-self characteristics (despite there being almost 20,000 trait terms in English (Furnham, 1999, p28)), and despite their having responded just a short time earlier to the SEI and Q sort that there were 'many things [they] would like to change about [them]selves'. The intention of following the SEI and Q sort with the ISI was that the participants would have had the opportunity to familiarlise themselves with concepts or psychological traits that could possibly be used in the ISI. The extent to which the women picked up on this aid was not recorded. However, it is clear that some participants found reflecting upon themselves and generating concepts very difficult. On the other hand, one participant was unable to generate more than three pairs of concepts precisely because she was content with herself (Gill). She recorded maximum scores on both the pre- and post-test ISI.

The varying abilities of the students to generate pairs of concepts may indicate their different stages within Erikson's identity statuses (1959; 1968). Erikson argued that identity formation was the major psychosocial task of adolescence, and theorised that 'in industrial societies, the college years provide the moratorium from adult responsibility that late adolescents need to explore their identities' (Wentworth and Peterson, 2001, p9). The moratorium phase allows questioning, searching and ultimately a resolution of identity-related questions in order to arrive at identity formation. The subsequent tradition of studying male identity development (e.g. Marcia, 1966; 1970; 1980) has been expanded to investigate how women's identity formation may be similar and different from men's. Marcia defined four types or statuses of identity formation, based on the presence or absence of crisis and commitment in occupational and ideological areas. These are illustrated in the following table.

Table 8.2: Marcia's identity formation statuses

Identity Foreclosure	(Young) People make identity commitments without going through a searching or crisis phase. Parental expectations or childhood beliefs are carried forward without being questioned
Identity Achievement	People have undergone the process of testing beliefs and options and made a commitment to a way of being
Moratorium	The 'crisis' or exploratory phase. People are struggling towards finding the right identity to commit to
Identity Diffusion	People experience neither crisis nor commitment. Despite having abandoned childhood beliefs, they are not looking for new ones. People are avoiding identity-formation tasks

One explication of Marcia's research is that midlife appears to be an important time for women to resume explorations into their identity. Midlife may present 'opportunities for re-evaluation and reorganisation of role commitments' (Wentworth and Peterson, 2001, p9), and returning to education may be the equivalent of Erikson's 'college years'. Stages within both individual and family life-cycles (Carter and McGoldrick, 1980) may impact on women's identities. However, the life cycle model suggests a linear process, and a more spiral-like approach might be more appropriate. Such an iterative course

would also link with Erikson's notion that biological, psychological and social forces interact in identity development (Wentworth and Peterson, 2001, p10).

This issue of a period of moratorium within identity formation occurring in midlife is highly relevant to this thesis. Although the majority of the women in this study would probably not want to be described as in 'midlife', the average age of the sample was in fact 38.9, the mean age being 40 years. The lack of a significant correlation between the difference in pre- and post-test ISI scores and age (see beginning of section 8.6) may reflect the notion that maturity is less dependent on chronological age than on state of mind. Research has suggested that, for women, 'completing their education' in terms of acquiring a degree, has meant they finally felt grown up, or, in Marcia's terms, reached Identity Achievement. For re-entry students, the period leading up to the decision to return to education and the period of studying itself relates to the Moratorium status.

The pertinence of these statuses can also be seen in relation to some women's ability for introspection or for self-reflection and thus the ease with which they could generate concept pairs for the ISI. Whilst Gill appears to demonstrate Identity Achievement, by her self-rating on both the pre- and post-test ISIs of the maximum possible score, other participants' lack of self-knowledge may reflect their position within the Identity Diffusion status. The necessary introspection may provide too much of a challenge for some students; it is less risky to avoid thinking about one's own shortcomings.

However, over the duration of the study, most women demonstrated their tentative movement within the Moratorium status. For some, an awareness of personal 'crisis' and the need for exploration and development is reflected in their choice of constructs. Exploration and growth is demonstrated in that their post-test ISI ratings were nearer to the ideal-self end of the spectrum compared to at the pre-test.

A related concept is that of identity consolidation (Pals, 1999; 2001), which refers to change and then stability in personality. This is also pertinent to the current research. Caspi and Roberts (2001) state that personality continuity is maintained and reinforced through individual differences in 'person-environment transactions', i.e. in how people select, interpret and evoke contexts. Pals (2001) suggests that these continuity-producing transactions are especially powerful when the task of constructing an identity requires that individuals explore and choose new identity-defining contexts and roles (Erikson, 1968). Although Pals refers to this happening during early adulthood, I suggest that re-entry students are also subjected to the same person-environment transactions and identity consolidation. Identity consolidation, however, can act as a mechanism of change; in the current research, women are actively seeking to alter some aspect of their lives or their identity, and returning to education is seen as a way of achieving this. One mechanism for promoting change through identity consolidation is referred to by Caspi and Roberts as 'watching ourselves'. By a process of subjective self-construction, identity consolidation involves watching the self within new contexts and thus promotes meaningful change for the individual. This is manifested in the current research in the ISI, where the participants were required to self-reflect and generate construct pairs, while considering themselves in their new context or role as an undergraduate student.

These concepts of identity statuses and identity consolidation relate back to Morgan's findings regarding women students' feeling of having 'changed as a person' as a result of returning to education. There is also a connection with the views of the participants in the current study, with regard to their movement along the present-self – ideal-self continuum and their expressed increases in confidence.

8.6 Summary

One of the purposes of this research tool was to measure levels of self-esteem by capturing participants' self-construals and by encouraging the women to articulate their subjective feelings about themselves. This aim was only partially successful, in that either too few constructs or no constructs at all could be generated. Nonetheless, even partially completed ISIs illustrated participants' different conceptions of self. Despite the individual nature of the profiles, closer analysis of the constructs elicited uncovered themes concerning intrapersonal skills and traits, interpersonal constructs and academic or employment issues. A priority for many women when considering their ideal-self was the notion of increased confidence.

Another aim of this instrument was to record differences in self-perception or self-esteem between the pre- and post-test ISIs. This tool was successful in indicating that participants' perceptions of themselves shifted over the duration of the study, towards the ideal-self end of the continuum. The difference between the pre- and post test scores was statistically significant. Analysis of the constructs generated suggested that increasing self-confidence was a goal for many of these students. However, personal growth of a more general nature was also an important consideration.

Another finding from this research tool was that returning to education presented challenges, in terms of both academic and personal risks. One challenge was confronted in the ISI itself: generating constructs required a level of self-reflection unfamiliar to some participants. The completion of the ISI uncovered possible differences in the women's identity statuses, and, in particular, their movement within the Moratorium status. The ISI also uncovered the issue of identity consolidation.

Clearly, the experience of returning to study with the Open University provided similarity of experience for some of the participants, despite their diverse backgrounds and circumstances. A point of comparison throughout this research, however, has been

the outcome of the group of women who, for whatever reason, were unable to complete their programme of study. The next section considers the ISI results of these withdrawers.

8.7 Withdrawers and the ISI

Although eight women had stopped their OU course by the time of the post-tests, these 'withdrawers' formed a vital part of the research. The experiences of such women provided a reference point against which to compare those students who had continued with their studies.

Of the 22 women who completed at least part of the ISI, 6 were withdrawers. These were Liz, Sue, Jane, Pat, Polly and Val. The table below shows the pre- and post test scores for these participants.

Table 8.3: Withdrawers' pre- and post-test ISI scores

	Percentage ISI score		
Participant	**pre-test**	**post-test**	**increase**
Pat	62%	67%	5
Sue	71%	71%	0
Liz	76%	76%	0
Polly	71%	86%	15
Jane	96%	98%	2
Val	57%	gained confidence	
average	72%	80%	4.4

In the pre-test, the scores for this sub-group of participants ranged from 57%, the median score for the whole group, to 96%, the second highest pre-test score within the whole group. The average score for this sub-group on the pre-test was 72%, which is above the mean score for the participants as a whole. Table 8.4 on the following page shows the comparison of scores between those women who completed their course and the withdrawers. Clearly, withdrawing from a course is not restricted to those who, according to this measure, have low self-esteem.

A similar picture is seen in the withdrawers' post-test ISI scores. Again the range of scores recorded stretches across the spectrum, from 65% to 98%. These participants showed either no increase between their pre- and post-test scores (Sue and Liz), a modest increase of either two or five points (Jane and Pat respectively), or 15 points (Polly). Val was not able to give a numerical indication of her revised place on the continuum, but stated that she felt she had increased in confidence.

The table below compares the scores of the completer and withdrawer sub-groups over the ISI.

Table 8.4: ISI scores for Completers, Withdrawers and All participants

	Completers (*n*=16)	**Withdrawers** (*n*=6)	**All** (*n*=22)
mean pre-test score %	54	72	59
mean post-test score %	56	80	72
median pre-test score %	57	71	57
median post-test score %	71	76	71
average increase pre/post test	13.7	4.4	11.1

This table again indicates that the withdrawer group was not comprised of low self-esteem participants. Indeed, the withdrawers' mean pre- and post-test scores were well above the average ISI scores for the group as a whole. However, the *increase* in scores over the two tests was much greater for the completer sub-group, despite Gill and Eve of the completer sub-group also recording no change in their post-test score. Referring to Appendix K, which shows the pre- and post-test ISI scores for all the participants, it can be seen that, with the exception of Polly, the withdrawers showed the lowest increases over the two tests. This suggests that, whilst embarking on a course of study may provide a modest boost to self-esteem, it is the continued success on and the completion of the course that leads to greater benefit to self-esteem. This is an area deserving of more investigation, especially with regard to the Open University.

Using the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI), it had already been attempted to establish baseline measures of and changes to levels of the participants' self-esteem. What

comparisons can be made between the results of the ISI and SEI? The next section attempts to address this point.

8.8 Comparisons between the ISI and the SEI

The SEI purported to provide a baseline measure of self-esteem, by tapping into different domains considered by Battle to be pertinent to this notion. Simply answering 'yes' or 'no' to 41 standardised questions gave a numerical measure of self-esteem and a self-esteem rating (from Very Low to Very High) against which a subsequent test could be compared. With the ISI, on the other hand, it was proposed to delve more deeply into the participants' own construal of self-esteem, by asking them to generate the constructs against which they then rated themselves. In this way, it was intended to establish not only levels of self-esteem but also the participants' own views of what constituted this phenomenon. As with the SEI, pre- and post-test ISI scores could be compared. How, then, do the results of the two tests correspond?

The correlation of the pre-test ISI percentages with the pre-test Self-Esteem Inventory scores gave a Pearson's r of 0.356 ($p = 0.104$). This means that there was no significant correlation between the scores on the two tests. The correlation of the post-test ISI percentages for the 18 participants who were able to provide them (i.e. excluding the four who gave only a verbal response, Maggie, Viv, Val and Kate) with the post test Self-Esteem Inventory scores gave a Pearson's r of 0.255 ($p = 0.304$). This means there was again no significant correlation between the scores on the two tests. As would be expected, there was also no significant correlation between the *changes* in scores on the two measures between the pre- and post-tests (Pearson's $r = 0.184$, $p = 0.464$).

This suggests that either the participants did not answer the two tests in a consistent fashion, or that the tests did not capture or measure the same variable. Such reliability and validity are key qualities in any test instrument, and the inference is that

one, both or neither instrument is reliable or valid. The SEI may have face validity in that it appears to measure particular aspects relating to self-esteem, such as social or personal self-esteem. However, a deeper analysis may reveal that the questions that are supposed to measure a particular aspect do not cluster very reliably, making the measure suspect. However, it will be recalled that there was a highly significant statistical difference between the pre- and post-test scores on the Academic self-esteem subscale (see section 6.7 of Chapter 6). In piloting the ISI, Norton *et al* (1995) correlated participants' scores with those achieved on Coopersmith's (1967) (not Battle's) Self Esteem Inventory. This gave a Pearson's *r* of 0.49, which was significant at the 0.01 level. In their main study, the correlation between the two measures was 0.45, significant at the 0.001 level. Norton *et al* took this as an indication that the ISI was a valid measure of overall self-esteem. Battle's SEI was chosen for the current research over Coopersmith's for its inclusion of academic self-esteem items, a facet of self-perception central to the investigation. However, it may be that, overall, the SEI itself is not dependable.

Both the SEI and the ISI rely on a form of self-report; the person who is being 'assessed' completes the test instrument. The extent to which people's responses to the instruments actually match their behaviour and their perceptions is still open to question. Although the researcher was unknown to them, the participants may have felt inhibited in answering the inventories. This is especially true of the ISI, an inherently very personal instrument; the spectrums on which the women were judging themselves had been self-generated. Nonetheless, scores on the two measures covered a wide range, including those purporting to indicate very low self-esteem. If the group had been concerned about appearing in a positive light, their scores would have clustered at the upper end of the continuum. The wide distribution of scores suggests that the women did actually dealt with the tasks in an honest way.

This does not, however, account for the lack of correlation between the SEI and ISI scores. It may be that the ISI is capturing something other than self-esteem. The highly significant statistical Wilcoxon test result gives credence to this. The participants showed greater increases on the instrument where the items were chosen by the women themselves. It is intuitive that the issues or characteristics placed on the ISI by the women themselves should have particular salience for them. Although there was some overlap between the concepts chosen for the ISI and those presented on the SEI, those on the ISI appeared to have most importance. Despite changes being recorded between the pre- and post-tests for these other two measures, the most informative one to reflect on is the ISI. This is because this instrument showed what was important to the women. If self-esteem is defined as the discrepancy between aspirations and successes in a given domain (Rosenberg, 1979), or between the ideal- and not-ideal-self (see Chapter 2, section 2.7.1), then the ISI may be the better tool to use to measure it. Furthermore, in addition to providing domains, in the ISI, participants also gave their evaluation of where they currently saw themselves.

A second area of importance in the issue of self-esteem is the internalisation of values or judgements by significant others (Cooley, 1902). The ISI does not make explicit the relevance of significant others but inherent in the evaluation process, and thus unseen by the researcher, may be the assumptions or values internalised by the participants. It is a shortcoming of this tool that such an important aspect is overlooked. Such weaknesses and benefits of this tool are discussed next.

8.9 Value of the ISI to this research

The ISI demonstrated the participants' movement along the ideal-self – not-ideal-self continuum. Using a constructivist approach, this instrument tapped into the individuals' own thoughts and theories that underpinned their views of themselves. The

constructs or phrases generated were those that were salient to the participants, as the words arose from their own subjective experience. The judgements or ratings were made within the women's own frames of reference.

A difficulty with this tool, however, was that the basic requirements, stipulated by Norton *et al* (1995) could not be met. None of the women could generate ten pairs of concepts. Clearly, the inability of the participants to fully complete the task meant that this test instrument, in this research, cannot be relied upon as a stand-alone measure of self-esteem. In their studies, however, Norton *et al*'s pilot sample of 35 and main study of 132 students all generated the requisite number of characteristics. It is not clear from Norton *et al*'s paper (1995) whether the Coopersmith inventory or the ISI was completed first. The order of completion may have a bearing on the results achieved.

However, the disparity between the outcomes of Norton *et al*'s and the present study may be due to several factors:

- Norton *et al*'s sample comprised traditional undergraduates, not mature distance learners
- Norton *et al* 's pilot sample were studying psychology (it is not clear if the main cohort were also psychology students), not studying courses from various other academic disciplines
- Norton *et al*'s participants may have been more familiar both with participating in research and with the style of the research
- Participants in the current research may have been given too little time to consider their answers. They may also not have fully understood what was being asked of them, or may have felt inhibited by the presence of the researcher

The varying number of pairs of constructs generated made comparisons between the group difficult, and less reliable. In addition, those women who had been unable to provide any pairs of concepts at the pre-test stage should have been asked, at the post-

test, if they then could think of ideal-self – not-ideal-self pairings. In this way, they may have demonstrated increased self-awareness or introspection over the study period, by being able to meet the task demands more closely. How, then, did this instrument advance the current investigation?

This research sought to address three questions, namely:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

Despite the shortcoming detailed above, an indication of how the women perceived themselves and their level of self-esteem was gleaned from those who could generate some construct pairs. On the other hand, whilst the ISI gave an indication of ideals towards which the women may have been working, many of the concept pairs were unrelated to education – the primary focus of this research. The women did not indicate within the ISI that returning to education was a way of achieving their ideals.

Whilst the ISI was clear in showing the discrepancy between the actual and ideal-self (important considerations in the research of self-esteem), it did not make explicit the role of significant others in self-esteem. The constructs generated may have disguised the tacit influence which family members and relevant others had on perceptions of self; thus the bearing of significant others could have been uncovered through subsequent careful probing or questioning. The second research question also concerns motivation, or goal orientation, whether individuals are growth or validation seeking. The differentiation between these types of goals was not made explicit within the concepts generated for the ISIs. However, it could be argued that the overall trend arising from the use of this instrument was for personal growth and not for validation.

A major disappointment was that there was no correlation between the scores on the SEI and the ISI. However, as section 8.5 indicated, the two tests may be measuring different facets of self-esteem, or indeed, separate but related phenomena. Just as the scores from the SEI alone cannot indicate if increases in self-esteem were actually attributable to returning to or completing a course of study, so the findings from the ISI by themselves are inadequate.

8.10 Conclusion

The ISI was chosen as a research tool in order to counter criticisms that the SEI and Q sort did not use participants' own words. The attempt was made to tap into self-esteem, via the constructivist approach of investigating the way in which the women built up or constructed their own views of themselves. The construct pairs provided an insight into the ways in which the women perceived themselves, by contrasting their ideal and their not-ideal selves. The ISI also showed where some women had difficulty with this method.

Because the participants were unable to generate the required 10 pairs of constructs an alternative scoring system had to be devised. Converting the ISI scores into percentages meant that comparisons within the group could be made, as well as charting any changes in score between the pre- and post-tests. Statistical analysis showed that there was a highly significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores, the implication being that self-esteem increased for the group overall.

Consideration of the difference in pre- and post-test scores for those women who withdrew before completing their programme of study showed that increases to self-esteem were not restricted to those who completed their course. Despite the greater benefit to self-esteem that seeing a programme of study through to the end may have, it

appears that starting but only partially completing a course still provides a modest boost to self-esteem.

Examining the ease or difficulty with which the participants completed the ISI uncovered the issues of identity statuses and identity consolidation. Despite its other shortcomings, this tool highlighted these important aspects which the SEI and Q sort overlooked. By constructing their own framework, within the constraints of the ISI, the participants were able to draw a more authentic picture of the way in which they construe themselves.

Analysis of themes within the construct pairings show that the women's perceptions focused predominantly on three areas, those of intrapersonal skills and traits; interpersonal roles and relationships; and academic/employment related aspects. Within the largest of these themes (intrapersonal skills and traits), 'confidence' emerged as a major preoccupation. Withdrawers also reported increased confidence. Despite the SEI and Q sort requiring the participants to rate themselves with regard to confidence, it appears to be by using the ISI that this attribute's salience particularly comes to the fore. This tool highlighted these women's perceived need to increase confidence, and suggested that they may have viewed re-entering education as a means of achieving it. Confidence, then, 'appears to play a key role in adults' judgements about the worth of a learning experience' (Calder, 1993, p132) and may be one of the key change factors in returning to study.

However, gaps still appear in understanding the catalyst for changes to self-esteem or self-perception. Further insight can be gained only from talking with the participants. Pre- and post-test interviews were conducted, and the next chapter reports the findings from those interviews.

9: Results from the Research Tools (4) Interviews

9.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the analysis of the interview data collected in the main study of this research. The participants were interviewed at both the pre- and post tests once they had completed the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI), the Q sort and incorporated the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI). The interviews were intended as an additional probe into the participants' view of themselves. Cohen and Manion (1985) suggest that interviews are a way of validating data collected by other research methods, and therefore this qualitative data was collected as a means of triangulation with the other research tools. It is also possible that another facet of self-esteem might be uncovered by this technique, since the notion of self-esteem *per se* is so difficult to capture and measure.

A general interview guide approach was adopted (Tobias, 1998). The standardisation and replicability demanded by the rigid, pre-set formula of the structured interview approach was overridden in favour of a format where the views and comments of the participants guided the interview (Burman, 1994). This chapter covers the interview data analysis procedure together with a discussion of the value of this technique to the investigation, hence making comparisons to the other research tools.

9.1.1 The interview technique

In the current research, the rationale for the use of interviews was to explore the participants' subjective feelings about themselves, in the context of returning to education. Some participants were themselves keen to ask questions, Teresa and Maggie in particular. In Teresa's case, this appeared to be so that she could compare the

researcher's earlier situation as an OU undergraduate with her own, whereas Maggie's intentions appeared to be in order to deflect attention from herself. Other participants requested specific information about, for example, the set up of the OU itself. The reasons for participants' questioning of the researcher may themselves warrant further investigation.

The framework for the data analysis follows, the results of which are presented in section 3.

9.2. Analysis of the interview data

According to Powney (1987), analysis of interview data is an act of 'constructive interpretation' (p158), and congruence of data analysis is an important notion. Congruence means that analysis must be consistent or compatible with the general underlying philosophy of the research. Such a philosophy could be of a 'first order' perspective. This is where research questions have matter-of-fact quality, e.g. related to the performance of students or the evaluation of one teaching programme over another, and concerned with the context of education, about institutions, or resources. Statistical analysis of interview data is the logical approach within this philosophy, resulting in answers to the 'what', 'how much', and 'how many' of education.

The 'second order' perspective is where research questions focus upon the experience of learning as it appears to the participants. The perceptions and values of participants are what count: insider stories; experiences; subjective accounts. This perspective is more relevant to the current research. The emphasis within this philosophy is on content analysis of interview data, e.g. the 'how' and 'why' of education as the participants see them. Categories may be established in advance and be coded, but in general terms the categories would more commonly be shaped by the analyst's interpretive constructs.

Within this second philosophy, descriptive methods are used rather than statistical analysis. The existence of numbers within an analysis does not necessarily indicate rigour within the research; similarly the absence of numbers doesn't equal a lack of rigour or quality. Consequently, there were several objectives apparent in the current analysis.

First, qualitative analysis within the current research set out to identify concepts that exemplified the way in which re-entering education impacted on re-entry students' self-perceptions.

Secondly, analysis of the interviews was used in this instance as a reflective method, a process to illustrate the focus of attention (i.e. self-esteem, self-perception) from the different perspectives of the participants and in case there was something new unacknowledged in the other tools.

However, even within these two philosophical perspectives, there is no single way of interpreting a complex data set of the type generated by the interview technique, nor a single way of analysing it. This is because there are always many different approaches and plausible interpretations depending on the focus of the research. There are many good answers to different questions, not just one right answer as in the detective story (Swift, 1996). The same set of analyses may well be interpreted in very different ways depending on the particular perspective of the interpreter (Calder, 1997). Consequently, there is no sharp divide between first and second order philosophical perspectives (Powney, 1987), and the current study is placed on some third ground between these two poles.

A third objective of the analysis was to demonstrate the shifts in self-perception that occurred over the duration of OU study; fourthly and finally, the analysis was undertaken as a form of triangulation, to provide evidence in support of the

interpretations constructed from the data provided from the other research tools (the Self Esteem Inventory, the Q sort and the Ideal Self Inventory). It might also uncover something new. This required a detailed search for consistency of philosophy and approach within the different forms of data. Analysis of the interviews, then, was more than a direct description of the data.

The coding of the interview transcripts moved 'from identifying categories that remain[ed] close to the original data to those that impl[ied] much broader analytic issues' (Coffey, 1996, p43). The data thus generated backed up the findings of the other tools, and provided deeper insights into the participants' subjective feelings about themselves. However, interview data cannot be analysed or interpreted out of sight of their situational contexts, nor without understanding of the meaning systems of participants (Labov, 1969). By not 'reducing the total interview situation to that part of its verbal channel which can be written' (Hull, 1985, p281) the researcher's 'off the record' observations and feelings during the fieldwork were used to interpret the 'on the record' transcripts. Indeed, these 'black-market' (Hull, *ibid*) data provided useful insights. In line with Hull, it was found that:

> *Data analysis and presentation became a matter of finding passages in the transcripts which accurately conveyed (in print) what I interpreted retrospectively to have been interviewees' intended meanings at the time of events...they were evidence in support of interpretations rooted in the black-market of my private understandings, in the unpublishable 'second record', not in the 'documents of the case'.* (p29)

There is a difficulty with conducting research into re-entry students' perceptions of themselves if it has to be based on 'scientific principles' of research. Mechanistic models of the person prioritise reductionism, where dependent and independent variables are essential units and complex systems are analysed and understood in terms of simple components. Such reductionism within the current research would be an over-

simplification of a highly complex topic; as Reason and Rowan (1981) imply, *people* cannot be reduced to sets of dependent and independent variables.

On the other hand, however, data has to be reduced via analysis to a manageable and understandable form. The data has to be re-presented in a way that is comprehensible to the reader. Description of the data cannot cover everything; the objective is to provide a limited view that has been chosen for a purpose (Powney, 1987). The interview data in the current research were dealt with in two ways: by 'data simplification' or reduction and by 'data complication' (Coffey, 1996, p28).

In using a data reduction approach, codes were applied in order to identify particular conceptual schema. This was to meet the first objective of the analysis (see above). In addition, this form of coding was partly to help with the retrieval of data segments categorised under the same codes. A further objective was to generate a 'quasi-quantitative' analysis; this allowed the aggregating, mapping and measuring of incidences of different codes (Coffey, *ibid*). The emphasis here was not solely on counting the number of instances; codes were attached as a means of firstly, identifying and, secondly, reordering data, so that they could be thought about in a way at variance with their original presentation.

As well as for data reduction, coding was also for data complication, or elaboration. Conceptualised in this way, coding served to 'expand, transform and reconceptualise the data, opening up more diverse analytical possibilities' (Coffey, 1996, p29). This meant going beyond the data, to expand the conceptual frameworks and dimensions for analysis, and was intended to meet the second, third and fourth analysis objectives.

An alternative view of this reduction and elaboration process is one offered by Tesch (1990), who suggests that what is involved in the analysis process is decontextualization followed by recontextualization. The former involves separating

meaningful extracts of data from their original context, whilst the latter involves organising and sorting these segments in order to provide a new context for analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1988) argue that coding, or 'conceptual ordering', is more than applying data to categories. Conceptualising the data leads to the raising of questions about it; these stages or processes are the precursors of theorising and the generation of provisional answers about the relationships among and within the data.

In the current research, then, transcripts of the interviews were scanned for appearances of the categories or concepts

9.2.1 Categories, concepts and coding

Codes or categories can come from a variety of sources. Coffey (1996, p32) suggests that these might be:

- A code list created, before reading the transcripts, from the researcher's conceptual or theoretical framework
- Key events, words or processes appearing in the transcripts. 'In vivo' codes come from the terms and language used by the interviewees themselves

Codes are not orthogonal, or mutually exclusive, however. In the current research, appropriate codes had been identified either at the outset of the research (e.g. they had relevance to the antecedents of self-esteem (Chapter 2, 12.4) such as Significant others), or they arose from the analysis of the previous research tools (e.g. roles; anxiety). Categories and concepts relevant to this research (not listed here in any significant order) were:

Motivation	Age	Education
Open University	Employment	Roles
Significant Others	Anxiety	Regret
Self-efficacy beliefs	Reflexivity	Personal Growth
Confidence	Hope/Enjoyment	Family Culture

In addition to the above, questions to the researcher and the replies or comments giving advice or encouragement were also noted.

Although applying seven categories is a useful heuristic when categorising interview data (Powney, 1987), more categories than this were considered necessary in order to capture the participants' concerns. Confidence and personal growth codes reflect the substantive research questions, and provide one way of organising the data. These categories allowed the reordering of the data in accordance with preliminary ideas and concepts. This is the first level of data coding.

Some of the more detailed codes came from the participants' words or responses. The code Hope/enjoyment is an example of this. Other codes, such as 'self-efficacy beliefs' and 'family culture', are summary glosses of what the participants appeared to be referring to.

The tapes of the interviews were transcribed. Each transcript was line-numbered and hard copies printed in double spacing. Transcripts were read through, and passages of text were coded according to the above schedule. The line numbers for each section of coded text were inserted on to a coding sheet (one per transcript). This meant that the occurrences of each category per transcript could be totalled, and instances of each category could easily be located by looking at line numbers on the coding sheet.

9.2.2 Inter-rater reliability

A random sample of 10% of the transcripts was coded by a second rater, following coding guidelines prepared by the researcher. The inter-rater reliability was 0.79. This is a good result, bearing in mind the number of categories to which utterances could be assigned. Some of the discrepancy in agreement was caused by the researcher rating smaller sections of text, and thus marking up more cases, than the second rater. Instructions had not been given for this. Other areas of disagreement were

due to contrasting views as to how cases should be categorised. The following are examples of this.

1. *I should love to work in a museum, if I could get museum work. I don't mean just watching on, I mean behind the scenes, renovating or something like that.* Clare

Debate between the raters centred on whether this should be classified as a 'reflection on self' or as a 'personal growth' statement. Ultimately, it was decided that this should classed as an indication of personal growth or change, as Clare was now considering a new area of employment; as a result of studying, she had become aware of other employment possibilities and her capability to carry them out. Consequently, a 'personal growth/change' categorisation seemed more appropriate.

2. *Sometimes you need that extra bit of oomph. You get stuck; you think 'oh goodness, I don't know it'.* Jane

Here, the second rater categorised this as 'anxiety'. In this section, however, Jane also stated:

> *That's the bit, getting down to the studying, but I know I can. I don't mind and in some ways, OK, I'm relaxed, I can do it, and I take my breaks. I'm quite good at getting myself to do things.*

The researcher had incorporated both these into one wider utterance, classified as 'self-efficacy beliefs'.

Coding the data in terms of simple themes appears initially to add little to the understanding of the data; these are examples of Coffey's data reduction (see above). However, such generic categories allowed the characterization of what particular stretches of the interviews were about, in terms of general thematic content. This is important, as data relating to one particular topic are not found in the same part of

different interviews, and the need to identify data that are about the same issues is a crucial part of understanding the data.

The next sections give the results from the quantitative analysis of the pre- and post-test interview data. However, bound up with this is the second order perspective introduced in section 9.2; qualitative analysis was considered in order, to illustrate participants' different perspectives about themselves, the shifts in that perception over the duration of the research, and as evidence in support of the findings from the other research tools. Sections 9.4 and 9.6 summarise the interpretations of the findings.

9.3 Results from the pre-test interviews

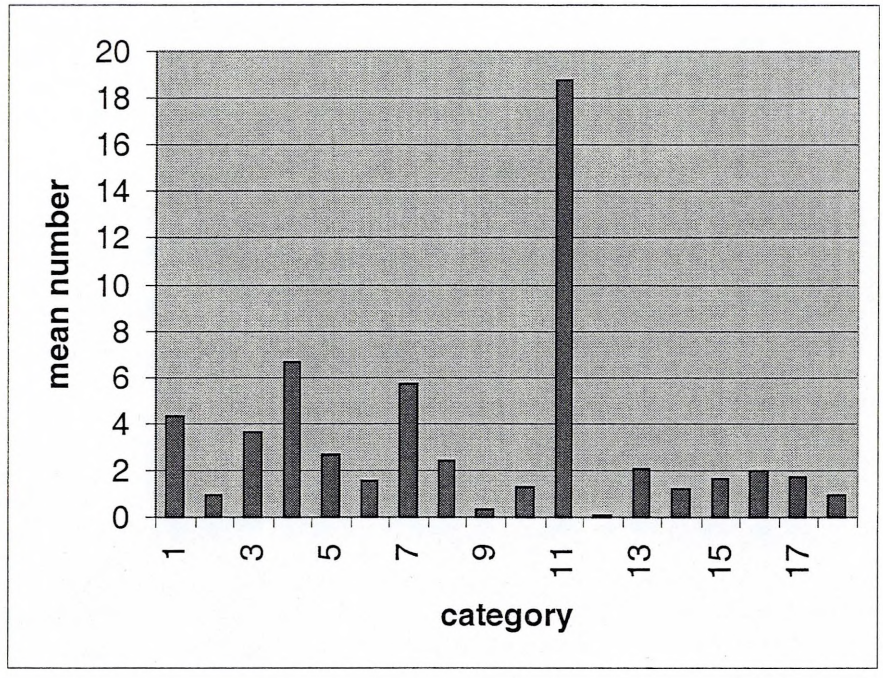
The average number of utterances coded for all participants was 60. The range was 9 (Fiona) to 128 (Viv), *sd* 29.2. Three important points arose from this data.

- The duration of the interview section of the research varied, depending on how forthcoming each participant was. The minimum was 15 minutes, with the maximum 45 minutes
- Three participants (Fiona, Ann and Becky) recorded only up to a third of the average number of utterances (i.e. less than 20 coded)
- The lack of spontaneity shown by these participants may point to the difficulty of talking about the topic being researched (i.e. self-esteem)

One aspect of this investigation, then, is to see whether not being able to talk about these topics is linked to low self-esteem.

The following figure illustrates the mean number of utterances per category or code, for all participants in the pre-test interview.

Figure 9.1: Mean number of utterances per category (pre-test)



Key

	Code	mean		Code	mean
1	Motivation	4.32	10	Self efficacy beliefs	1.26
2	Age	0.94	11	Reflection on self	18.77
3	Education	3.65	12	Meaning of success	0.06
4	OU	6.65	13	Personal Growth/Change	2.06
5	Employment	2.71	14	Questions to researcher	1.23
6	Roles	1.52	15	Researcher replies	1.61
7	Significant others	5.74	16	Hope/Enjoyment	2.00
8	Anxiety	2.42	17	Confidence	1.74
9	Regret	0.35	18	Family culture	0.97

The most frequently occurring category was reflection on self (number 11); the mean number of utterances per participant in this category was 18. This represents 32% of the overall coded utterances. The next most frequently occurring code was 'OU' – utterances relating to the set up of the OU, course materials, tutorials and so on. Reference to significant others was the third most frequent topic, followed by the motivation for study.

Interwoven with these first order, quantitative results is the qualitative aspect. The following sections concentrate on the categories pertinent to this research; the OU category is not examined in detail as the focus of this topic was background talk about

the structure of the University, opinions regarding course material and so on. The sections consider the 'numerical' findings relating to reflection of self, significant others and motivation and indicate how they may be interpreted in conjunction with the second order perspective.

9.3.1 Reflection on self

The high proportion of utterances coded as 'reflection on self' (32%) perhaps bears out Bouma, Atkinson and Atkinson's view (1995) that people like talking about themselves. However, this may be true only when positive aspects of the self are under consideration; discussing intangible subjects such as self-esteem may be more problematic. To counter criticisms that this category was the largest because it had been defined in too broad a manner, utterances were thus allocated where participants demonstrated having ruminated or expressed an opinion or judgment about themselves. Some examples of utterances classed as self reflection are:

> *I knew I could have done a lot better [at school]. I always wished I had done, really.* Trish

> *I think [being on my own] is a habit, because that's the way I started out; it's not the way I imagined my path would go.* Barbara

> *You've got your identity in either place [work and home], I've thought about that quite a bit.* Deb

What is important here is not only the quantity of comments about self, but their quality. Further analysis of this category revealed that participants were being analytical and self-critical. It is suggested that re-entering education is precipitated by a crisis and/or by a great deal of soul searching (Mezirow, 1978; McLaren, 1985); these participants may be exemplifying this view. In his synopsis of different types of

learning, Mezirow identifies a kind of learning in which people become critically aware of:

> *The cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives* (p101).

Although the women in this study would not couch it in such terms, one analysis is that these participants are developing a 'personal paradigm for understanding [them]selves and [their] relationships' (*ibid*), and re-entering education is fundamental to this exploration and development. As was seen in the pilot study (i.e. Felicity, Louise and Audrey's emotional upset, Chapter 4, 4.8.2), this type of transformative learning can be an intensely threatening experience (Mezirow and Associates, 2000). Transformative learning will be revisited in section 9.5.1 below.

9.3.2 Significant others

Relevant to this type of self-reflection, then, is reference to significant others. Nine per cent of the coded utterances fell in to this category. An antecedent, recognised throughout the literature, of self-esteem is the role played by significant others (see Chapter 2, section 2.7.2). It is intuitive then, that in an investigation into self-esteem, a primary focus of attention should be on those people with whom the participants have significant relationships. Further analysis of this category of utterances showed that talk of this type related to the educational and professional achievements of siblings; the views and aspirations of parents; and the reaction to OU study of partners, friends and colleagues. These topics are relevant in this discussion, as these significant others appear to influence the perception of self, held by the individual participants.

In the pre-test interview, 65% of the women stated that they received support from their partner, parents, children or wider family or friends. However, this notion

encompasses both emotional and practical 'support', which may have different levels of effectiveness.

The support received was mostly of the emotional kind, with verbal or passive encouragements the most common:

> *My dad thinks it's the best thing I've ever done! And my brother, too.* Polly
>
> *My aunt and uncle, whose daughter is studying, they are very supportive.* Sally
>
> *[My husband] is very supportive. He doesn't have a degree himself, but nearly.* Clare

As with Clare, for several women, partners and other family members were often sources of inspiration:

> *My ex husband, he studies with the OU, and he said 'oh, why haven't you done that?' He said, 'come on, just do it'.* Carol
>
> *My sister's done it as well, not with the OU, she went to Poly. Training to become a teacher now....it's an incentive...I can see she's already done it. You can see the benefits at the end of it.* Trish

Very occasionally this emotional support was backed up with practical help:

> *My husband's behind me 100%. When I did the English Language, I had to do timed essays, and he'd say 'you lot, keep out of the kitchen, Mum's doing her essay' and he'd bring me the clock and say 'you've got 10 minutes left'.* Viv

The social integration of studying into everyday family life is important for the student to succeed (Kember, 1999), and 'family members taking on additional responsibilities in order to give the student free time to study' (p115) is the ideal, sadly not often achieved. Becky reported that her mother would child-mind so she could attend tutorials (but not if she wanted 'to go out'), but there are no other examples from the interviews in the current study of family members adapting their routines to

accommodate the needs of the student. From her study with OU women students in Northern Ireland, Castles (1999) concludes that:

> *Emotional support is very valuable, but how much more valuable it would be for a partner to take some of the housework or childcare from the student* (p13).

This would appear to be pertinent in the current study too.

The views of partners, children and even the women's own parents impacted on the extent to which studying was carried out as a visible or hidden activity, or indeed if it could be started at all. Fiona stated that any sort of formal studying would have been impossible with her first husband, implying that there would have been disapproval, or a withholding of 'permission' to study in the first place. Other women reported dismissive comments from family members about attempts to study:

> *She'd [mother] be thinking what she's always thought 'oh another one of those things. She'll just give it up'.* Holly

> *My husband's fine, so long as it doesn't affect him too much...My 14 year old is quite rude about [my studying].* Eve

> *[My son], he said 'you've got no hope, Mum'.* Sue

Such lack of encouragement or support appears to be a disincentive, adding to the women's struggles.

The women in the current study appear typical of OU students in their domestic situations and in the level and types of support they do (or do not) receive. Personal circumstances and perceived level of support may then be factors contributing to the students' ability to adapt to and satisfy the demands of returning to degree-level study.

Comparisons were frequently made between the achievement of self and others, with the self found wanting. Parents' views regarding the appropriate type or level of education for girls (or of a particular social class) were scrutinized and blamed for

restricting academic achievement at the conventional age. Both these factors could serve to dampen the self-esteem of those on the receiving end.

A mitigating factor, however, may have been the reaction of partners, friends and colleagues. Partners in particular were a source of 'support' (however this is defined). A participant's self-esteem could be raised by the encouragement received in this way and by her partner's belief that she was capable student. However, such beliefs applied to the self – self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977; 1982) – did not dominate in the pre-test interview, accounting for only 2% of the coded utterances. In some cases, however, it was partners who provided the final impetus for the student to enrol on the course. Nevertheless, incentives to return to study were many and varied, as the next section illustrates.

9.3.3 Motivation, or goal orientation

The motivation for re-entering education was a frequent topic, accounting for 7% of the participants' talk. The women gave on average between 3 and 4 reasons for studying for a degree, with eight women giving no more than two reasons, and four women giving six reasons. Across the group of 37 women, a total of 131 responses were given to 15 different reasons (generated by the women themselves). The following table shows how these responses were distributed.

Table 9.1: Motivations for returning to study

Reason	responses	%
needed to	22	17
job/career	20	15
wanted to	19	15
for self	14	11
prove could	12	9
increase confidence	10	8
broaden thinking	9	7
get brain to work	7	5

something to do	4	3
pleasure/interest	3	2
for reward at end	3	2
easy/convenient	3	2
learn something	3	2
switch off from life	1	1
unfinished business	1	1
	131	100

The primary reason given for returning to education was a perceived 'need to'. Discussion of 'needs' is often problematic as it involves questions of who identifies the needs and that individuals have needs of which they are unaware but which nonetheless affect their actions (Stephenson and Percy, 1989, p39). All participants, however, spoke of needs, whether implicitly or explicitly – for qualifications, to enhance job prospects, for a new direction in life. Such focus on the reasons relates to the discussion regarding motivation in section 2.4.1 of Chapter 2. Needs and the motivations to return to education can be conceptualised as parallel: academic, vocational or personal. Apparent within these three goals are extrinsic and intrinsic interests (Taylor, 1981). The acquisition of a qualification for itself, studying 'for the reward at the end', or to enhance job prospects could be seen as extrinsic motivators, whereas studying for pleasure or interest, to prove that one can, or to increase confidence could be seen as intrinsic motivators, although the distinction is not a clear cut one. Clearly there are parallels between these classifications and the growth- or validation-seeking goal orientations that this thesis seeks to explore.

9.3.3.1 Extrinsic motivation, or validation-seeking goal orientation

Extrinsic motivation in education is defined as learning as a means to some other end (Gibson, 1998, p85), e.g. to enhance job prospects. Acquiring academic qualifications could also be a way of obtaining approval from others. Positive feedback itself, regarding a well-written essay or the development of time management skills necessary to dovetail domestic and academic commitments, can provide the validation

that some students may seek. Indeed, for many women in the current study, there was an external purpose to gaining further qualifications.

Employment related reasons

In the current study, 20 out of the 37 women (54%) gave job or career reasons for embarking on a degree. Three women (2%) particularly wanted the degree, the reward at the end of the prolonged period of study. For two participants who were nurses, it was an expectation that they would continue learning. Some women stated that the stereotypically female jobs that they had had before childrearing were unappealing to return to; that a lack of qualifications restricted employment choice or hindered chances of promotion; or that the accreditation boom of recent years meant that their previous qualifications were inadequate:

> *For my job, I need to prove that I can study at degree level.* Hazel

> *The reason I'm doing this is to promote myself, excel myself (sic) into maybe better work.* Polly

> *When my daughter went to school I got a job working at a school that suited me perfectly...but I find it's no longer enough for me...the trouble is, you need qualifications and I haven't got any.* Clare

For some women there was recognition that in re-entering the job market they would be competing with well-qualified youngsters or face returning to a similar job in a demoted capacity:

> *I haven't relished the thought of returning to work and not being at the top of the tree – perhaps even being junior to someone younger than me.* Gill

Women's broken work pattern can, however, be exploited: time taken out of the workplace to raise family gave the opportunity to reconsider:

> *When my daughter goes to school, I'd like to move into something else, other than administration in an office.* Sally

> *When my toddler is old enough and I can go to work, I don't really want a dead end job.* Sue

In this way, the women in this study saw educational capital as a key potential resource (Pascall and Cox, 1993), and occupational incentives were part of the spur to return to education. This links to human capital theory, where an investment in education has anticipated returns in the labour market (Felmlee, 1988).

The necessity of being economically marketable may also be brought to the fore by marriage or relationship breakdown. Starting a degree is a practical way of stepping on to the career ladder and realising economic independence, earning an income as well as earning some power:

> *I recently got my divorce through...breaking up, having this happen has made me think.* Sally

> *Because I'm on my own with the children, I envisage myself working from home...[I'm doing this] for work purposes.* Celia

These students' motivations compare to the findings in other studies. Work-related motivations for studying were the ones most frequently mentioned by the 5,653 adults who responded to the 1997 National Adult Learning Survey (Beinart and Smith, 1997) and nearly half of the adult learners in Britain surveyed by Sargant, Field, Francis, Schuller and Tuckett (2001) gave work related reasons for returning to education (p26).

Validation-seeking

However, some of the reasons cited for returning to education were of a less vocational nature and more obviously related to gaining reassurance or validation:

To prove to myself that I can still do it. Ann

Getting the feedback, hopefully, it'll make me feel better. Trish

Reassurance that I'm not stupid, and I'm not worthless, cos that's how I feel. Bev

Prove that I could do it, prove that I could cope at that level. Paula

Participants who spoke in these sorts of terms were also likely to express anxieties about other aspects of studying. They were often nervous about time management, their ability to understand the course materials, submitting written work and the end-of-course exam (if there was one):

Leaving school with only GCSEs, I didn't think I'd stand a chance [of being accepted by the OU]. Sally

*I'm **very** nervous about the essay. I know you've got books to help with the essay writing, but... There was so much in that paragraph! Figures, plus other information, which one do I put down?! What's the right answer?* Polly

Mainly, I'm worried about if I can cope, if I'm up to it. Fiona

Participants who demonstrated through their talk such high levels of anxiety are to be admired, however, for pursuing a course of action that was clearly a source of worry for them. Extrinsic motivating factors or the desire to receive validation were powerful enough to override such negative emotions. However, these motivations ran alongside other purposes. The next section considers intrinsic aspects of participants' motivations.

9.3.3.2 Intrinsic motivation, or growth-seeking goal orientation

Intrinsic motivation in education is the desire to learn for skill development, intellectual interests, challenge, or personal growth (Gibson, 1998, p85). Deci (1975) suggests that intrinsic motivation results from a form of information processing. Acting

upon information from their environment, their own memory and their internal needs, individuals conclude that they need to obtain a particular type of satisfaction, or to develop on a personal level. In the current study, this is achieved through returning to education.

Of the responses to the question 'why study?' 83% fell into the intrinsic motivation category (see table 9.1 above). The desire for self-development appears to be central to many women's reasons for embarking on a degree. Whether the women prioritised the acquisition of skills to enable them to re-enter the workplace or to improve their status within in it, or highlight the necessity of 'doing something for themselves', the desire to develop, to change, was implicit. Examples of this nature were plentiful:

> *The main thing is to get my brain working again, get some discipline in actually learning something, with something to aim for at the end....feel that I've achieved something.* June

> *There was a selfish element in it [returning to education] where I actually really wanted to do it. Basically, I really just wanted to do it...I want the feeling that 'yes, I can do it'.* Clare

> *It's something I wanted to do for myself and for my own personal development.* Gill

> *I won't be happy until I've got a degree.* Becky

These findings concur with earlier research: Willen (1988) concluded that women's motivations for studying are related to self-improvement as well as to occupational goals, and McLaren (1985) states that women returners must be 'impelled by a strong urge for self-development' (p15).

To categorise motivations as either extrinsic or intrinsic, however, is perhaps to create a false dichotomy. As this study shows, reasons given by an individual for

returning to education may not fall neatly into one or other category. In addition to issues relating to validation- or growth-seeking, women have other concerns. For women, the motivation to embark on a course of study may be linked to choices regarding roles they currently hold and would like to hold, and is contingent on family roles and responsibilities (Bradburn *et al*, 1995). Decisions to return to education are often triggered by critical life events, a response to a crisis (Pascall and Cox, 1993), or a reassessment of goals and priorities (Justice and Dornan, 2001, p237). For some women in the current study, returning to education had indeed been precipitated by a change in their domestic circumstances:

'Since I've been on my own, I've had to...' Trish, single parent of 3

[My marriage] breaking up, having all this happen made me think.
Sally, single parent of 1

Such stocktaking and introspection is the catalyst for action. This appears to be linked to the lifecycle theory approach to adult motivation, which the next section considers.

9.3.3.3 Lifecycle approach to motivation

Humans develop in chronological stages and different needs predominate in each stage. There comes a time when the 'neglected artistic and spiritual sides of the personality' (West, 1996, p6) have to be cultivated, and the desire to find meaning or satisfaction in life prompts reassessment and action. Levinson (1978) suggests that middle-aged adults experience intense period of self-evaluation, and Jung (1954) also stated that at around 40 people begin to reassess how their lives have developed up to this point. Although some women in the current study who felt this way would not consider themselves middle aged, there was evidence that such stocktaking, for some, had been going on:

It's going to be in my 40s before I can work, but a lot of people do it now. Sue

*You're a middle-aged woman, what are you doing? But I **need** to do this!* Kate

Stewart and Vandewater (1999) believe that a process of midlife review does take place among women in early middle age; such a review may result in regret about past sacrifices and the desire to effect a change in circumstances. The Chambers 20th Century Dictionary defines regrets as 'sorrowful wishes that something had been otherwise'; Lecci, Okun and Karoly (1994) define regrets as 'unfulfilled or unattainable intentions or goals' (p731), thus placing regrets in the domain of motivation. Clearly, some women in the current study regretted missed educational opportunities from earlier in their lives, and, importantly, were spurred by such reflections to take corrective action.

According to Bradburn *et al* (1995), the transition into adulthood is marked by 'educational completion' (p1517), and some of the women in the current study did appear to equate returning to education as a step towards closing off an aspect of their lives which would allow them to feel grown-up. For example, not having a degree left Gill feeling:

There was unfinished business; that I never achieved all I could have.

For Deb, gaining a degree was necessary 'to complete my education'.

This notion of uncertainty and of rediscovery of self through education has parallels with Levinson's life stages. Traditionally, people pass through diffusion and moratorium stages in adolescence or early adulthood, to achieve identity consolidation; however, in mid-life adults may return to a state of moratorium whilst they try to make sense of their lives to date and to work out the way forward. Returning to education can either be part of that process or a catalyst for it. Returning to education becomes an important turning point in women's lives, giving rise to different opportunities and

altering their paths through life (Bradburn *et al*, 1995), as well as having implications for identity.

For some of the women in the current study, dissatisfaction with self, confusion over identity and the need to get on to a new track were important motivating forces for embarking on a degree. As table 9.1 above shows, it is apparent that *needing* or *wanting* to study for a degree for *themselves*, for validation or for self-development, was central for many of the participants. This relates to the discussion in earlier chapters regarding the distinction between people who are validation- or growth-seeking in their goal orientation (Dweck, 1990; Dykman, 1998).

9.3.3.4 Self-esteem and confidence

Goal orientation is linked to self-esteem. In her table of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goal Orientations (to learning), Gibson (1998) lists 'self-improvement' as an intrinsic personal goal, as it is concerned with personal growth and enjoyment of learning. However, this table lists 'proof of capability' (p86) as a personal extrinsic goal as it is related to self-esteem or status. Despite these semantic nuances, increasing self-esteem or confidence is the next most cited reason in this study for returning to education (see table 9.1 above):

> *I think [returning to education/getting a degree] gives you confidence in yourself.* Trish

> *[Doing this course] will help me gain more knowledge and confidence.* Jane

> *It would help my confidence no end, if I could see the course through to the end.* Pat

Although asking participants if they 'needed' to return to education (see Appendix D) is to make use of an ambiguous term, it did allow what was most salient to the participants

to surface (Pascall and Cox, 1993, p81). For many of the women, an overt impetus to re-enter education was to develop the self.

West (1996) suggests that 'misunderstandings' of adult motivation to return to education have arisen because the students have not 'been encouraged to reflect in a flexible and longitudinal way on their reasons for educational participation and learning in the context of past as well as present lives' (p1). West states that the complexities and subtleties of motivation should not be overlooked; 'we are all to an extent scripted by our culture' (p5) and there may be forces that shape our actions of which we are unaware. He states that, given the choice, students will cite vocational over personal justifications for returning to education, because it is more acceptable and respectable to talk in those terms. However, he argues that 'the distinction drawn between vocational and personal motives for learning is artificial and reductionist' and that the experiences of adult learners may be understood as constituting part of

> *individuals' struggles for **self** within **subjective** and cultural dialectics in which inner lives and the confidence to take risks are shaped by important others as well as social situation, the past and the present* (p207). (Emphasis added.)

This brief discussion has attempted to show that extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for returning to education were apparent in the women's talk, but that these distinctions are not clear-cut. Indeed, contradictions and ambiguities in the talk were rife, but appear to demonstrate that the experience of even considering returning to education results in self-reflection and a degree of personal growth. The message which came through from the women in this study was that they were having a further try at education for reasons of self development. It is this aspect and their subjective reactions to the experience of distance learning that this study sought to explore.

9.4 Summary

Findings from the first and second order perspectives highlight issues that are central to this research.

- With a few exceptions, participants demonstrated a propensity for self-reflection
- References to significant others occurred frequently in the participants' talk
- Also salient were the motivations for returning to education and overt or covert referrals to issues of confidence and personal growth, within the context of re-entering education.

The main hypothesis for this study is that re-entering education will result in changed self-perception and heightened self-esteem. These results show clearly that one route open to these particular participants to changing self is re-entering education. This confirms the findings of the Ideal Self Inventory, where the theme of intrapersonal traits and skills was the strongest, within which 'confidence' was a prime preoccupation. These pre-test interview findings add weight to the notion that education is seen as a catalyst for personal change.

The three participants who spoke very little in the interview (Anne, Fiona and Becky – see section 9.3) rated as Intermediate, Low and Very Low respectively on the pre-test Self Esteem Inventory. Ann and Fiona's motivations for returning to education appeared to be in line with a validation-seeking goal orientation (see section 3.3.1), whereas Becky appeared motivated to grow personally. From this there seems to be little relationship between self-esteem, amount of talk and goal orientation.

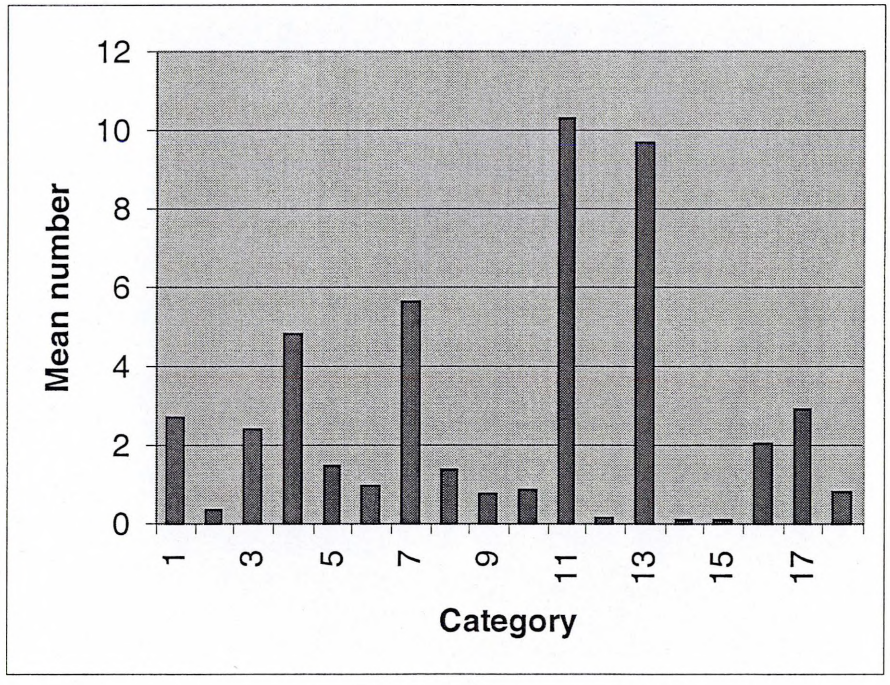
Ann did not speak of significant others at all, but 20% of Fiona's and Becky's talk was related to this, which is twice the average proportion of the sample as a whole. An emphasis on significant others within the talk is also highly relevant to this discussion, because of its centrality to the concept of self-esteem. However, more

revealing are the emphases within the participants' talk at the post-test interview; these are discussed next.

9.5 Results from the post-test interviews

Analysis of the post-test interview transcripts showed that the greatest proportion of participants' responses was again related to self-reflection (mean = 10.33, or 21%); however, there was a large increase in the mean number of utterances related to personal growth/change, as the following figure shows.

Figure 9.2: Mean number of utterances per category (post-test)



Key

	Code	Mean		Code	Mean
1	Motivation	2.73	10	Self efficacy beliefs	0.87
2	Age	0.37	11	Reflections on self	10.33
3	Education	2.40	12	Meaning of success	0.17
4	OU	4.80	13	Personal growth/Change	9.70
5	Employment	1.50	14	Questions to researcher	0.10
6	Roles	0.97	15	Researcher replies	0.10
7	Significant others	5.63	16	Hope/Enjoyment	2.03
8	Anxiety	1.40	17	Confidence	2.93
9	Regret	0.77	18	Family culture	0.83

In comparison to the pre-test interview, where the proportion of references to personal growth was 3%, at this stage of the research 20% of participants' talk related to personal growth or change. Section 9.5.3 considers these results.

The next most frequently occurring category was that of significant others, representing 11% of the total. This compares with 9% in the pre-test interview. Of interest, however, is also the increase in utterances related to 'confidence'. In the post-test, this accounted for 6% of utterances, compared to 3% at the pre-test. The relevance of this category will be discussed in section 9.5.2. The next section deals with the category of significant others.

9.5.1 Significant others

Greater reference was made to significant others in the post-test than in the pre-test. Although the quantitative difference was slight, the qualitative change merits some comment. In the pre-test, the role of significant others, such as husbands, partners or parents, was, with a few exceptions, one of support and encouragement. However, once the studying was a practical rather than a theoretical activity, the attitude of significant others shifted. Indeed, some appeared to be emotionally fragile themselves. This had a knock-on effect on the participants. The necessary reorganisation in home routines brought about by the intrusions of studying appeared to be unwelcome to other family members, especially partners or husbands. Evans suggests that partners can object to changes in both home circumstances and the student's identity, and in some instances 'work to destroy' them (Evans, 1995, p174).

For a few participants, however, partners and parents did play a more supportive role. Gratitude was expressed for the 'help' with domestic chores or childcare that partners had given in order to free up some more time for the student to study.

Exceptionally, a partner would take a direct interest in the course work. Encouragement, however, was more often covert in nature, with partners making fewer demands of the student, rather than giving overt praise or constructive help.

Children, in particular, appeared to provide a source of support and encouragement for the students; this was a contrast in emphasis from the pre-test interviews. Many women could see the effect that 'going back to school' had on their own children; this impacted in several ways. Firstly, children were impressed by what their mothers were doing (although one teenager was incredulous that anyone would want to study voluntarily). Although studying was generally carried out beyond view, when children were at school or, for younger ones, in bed, they had taken notice of what their mothers were doing:

> *It's had an impact on the older one; she talks about me being at school.* Becky

> *I think they were proud, the older ones. I know they have said to their mates 'My mum's doing an OU course, what does you mum do?'* Bev

This appeared to give an added commitment to 'school work' to both the children and the mother. Secondly, it gave some women an appreciation of the difficulties their children might face in dealing with their school work, in terms of content and volume as well as motivation to study. In addition, participants were likely to report a change in their own attitude towards further and higher education for their children. Many participants had spoken of their studying with the OU as a means of making up for lost time or opportunities, and were now keen that their own children would benefit from the educational options now available to them:

> *I think it's good that she sees that mums can do that. Hopefully she'll have the idea that she can carry on studying throughout her life.* Becky

> *It's definitely changed my attitude [to own children's learning]. It makes you more involved because you suddenly realise 'hang on, this is important'. If they*

don't do it now they'll probably be doing what I did, which is going back to it...I'd encourage them to carry on [at the conventional time]. Trish

The views of the participants' own parents featured less in their talk in the post test interview. Nonetheless, they still had an impact, especially when they were less than encouraging. A lack of understanding, perhaps more prevalent in parents who had themselves little experience or knowledge of higher education, could temper new students' enthusiasm. Less than positive attitudes, however, could serve to make participants all the more determined.

The above illustrate several points with regard to significant others:

- Partners can feel threatened by the students' new-found interest and success
- The 'support' offered is likely to be covert rather than practical
- Children are a source of encouragement and motivation
- Students' own parents can be disinterested, uninterested or enthusiastic.

These issues have relevance to this discussion as further analysis reveals the impact that they had on the students themselves:

- Practical issues, such as finding time and space to study, have to be negotiated. This can involve deep reflection about the costs and benefits of studying
- Participants have to manage the conflicting emotions around studying of their partners, children and parents, as well as dealing with their own feelings
- Significant others' views about the participant have to be assimilated with their own shifting perceptions of self

This highlights how students are faced with numerous issues that they have to cope with (Schlossberg *et al*, 1991), even when considering only their significant others; such challenges require complex coping responses in order to deal with them (Schlossberg, 1995).

Importantly, the above examples demonstrate the role played by an individual's personal resources: attitudes and behaviour need to be adapted in order to cope with the

demands surrounding returning to study. It is apparent that changes were not confined to just the students – people around them were susceptible to shifts in behaviour or attitude as they adjusted to imposed new routines. Central to this thesis is the impact of re-entering education on the students' self-perception; however, it is apparent that significant others are not unaltered by the process. Equally clear is the amount of emotional work that students must do to accommodate significant others' views of both themselves and the student.

The quality of talk about significant others supported the hypothesis that family members, colleagues and friends played an important role in the women's developing sense of self. The issues of reflexivity and significant others within this discussion are pertinent, especially considering the central role of parents on self-esteem and the formation of the self-concept. Mezirow suggests that a frame of reference or the perspective on the self derives from the idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers (Mezirow and Associates, 1990, p16/17); our values and sense of self is anchored in such frames of reference. However, through some event, such as re-entering education, an individual can become aware of holding a limiting or distorting view of the world or of themselves; undergoing the process of learning can add compatible ideas to a person's frame of reference, which allows them to 'try on another's point of view'. One outcome of re-entering education, then, is the challenging and potential alteration of students' frames of reference. If students critically examine their views, open themselves to alternatives and consequently change the way they see things, they have transformed some part of how they make meaning out of the world (Cranton, 2002) and of themselves. This phenomenon Mezirow terms transformative learning. This process is reliant on people's ability to reflect (p19), both about themselves and about broader, cultural paradigms. Reflection becomes an act of both reasoning and intuition, and,

according to Mezirow, by acting on insights thus gained, people can overcome situational and emotional constraints.

This is highly relevant to this discussion. The participants in the current study demonstrated a high level of reflexivity in their talk; the impact that significant others had on them was either made apparent or alluded to; they demonstrated in the interviews their openness to personal change. These factors are the foundations for transformative learning, and apposite when considering self-perception and education.

It would appear that participants' feelings, both within and about themselves, are subjected to a roller coaster ride (Weisenberg, 2001), incorporating negative as well as positive emotions. However, what predominated in the post-test interviews was talk related to participants' *positive* affective beliefs, especially regarding confidence, as the next section demonstrates.

9.5.2 Confidence

The occurrence of incidences categorised as 'confidence' increased in the post-test, from a pre-test percentage of 3%, to 6% (see figure 9.1 in section 9.3 and figure 9.2 in section 9.5). As a proportion of the total talk, the quantity of post-test references to confidence may not appear huge, but an examination of the qualitative rather than the quantitative aspect of this analysis reveals its importance.

Participants were able to take a wide perspective when considering the benefits to confidence that studying could bring:

> *[Studying] gives you confidence in yourself, because if you've got confidence it helps in a lot of angles in your life.* Trish

Participants spontaneously introduced the issue of confidence even when the interview question had been intended to probe another topic. Becky spoke of increased

confidence in the context of dealing with professional people, but also referred to greater confidence within herself:

> *I'm more confident when talking to professional people, I'm not some sort of lower species...[the studying] has changed me, it has made me more confident that I can be where I want to be, not confined to one thing in life.*

Although some participants' increase in confidence was limited to within the domestic sphere, greater confidence *per se* could have repercussions in wider the aspects of the women's lives:

> *I do feel more confident, about everything...I do feel more confident with myself and with others...* Sally

> *I am not super-duper confident, but I have certainly got a lot more. Last week, I had to go on an induction course, and I was quite happy to walk in to a room full of people, sit next to somebody and chat to them. Before I would have found a seat where I didn't have to talk to somebody...it's because of doing this course.* Clare

Generally, however, the participants' focus when talking about confidence, was how studying had had a positive effect. The issue of confidence broadens out, encompassing academic and personal life, and leaving no aspect of their lives unaffected. Tina provides a particularly good example. The researcher's field notes do not indicate that this participant lacked confidence; on the contrary she was able to articulate quite concisely what many other participants were able only to imply:

> *I am proud of my OU work; taking this course has given me more confidence studying and potential to add new skills (sic)...I don't think I could have envisaged that I would be sitting and looking for things [related to the course].*

The participants in this study generally reported increases in confidence over the duration of their studies. These examples suggest that the women were actually talking about their increased value or self-worth – their *self-esteem* – but in the guise of

confidence. It appears that a facet of self-esteem, often overlooked and thus unmeasured, is confidence.

Reported changes were not restricted to increases in confidence, however; change and development within the women's lives was widespread, as this next section illustrates.

9.5.3 Personal Growth/Change

As indicated in 9.5, analysis of the post-test interview data revealed that a fifth of utterances related to personal growth or change. Typical of the comments coded in this way were those of Sally, Clare and Tina:

> *All aspects of my life are much better now; [This course] has really opened my eyes up; I am happier than I was...I feel more intelligent...more whole as a person; I know the OU has actually given me this, I do know that, because of the rapid effect it seems [to have had]; I know now that I am not the same [as at the pre-test].* Sally

> *I have proved this year that I can do it; I want to know; I am buying history books which I would not even have dreamt of, [my behaviour] has changed completely; [studying with the OU] has given me so much, it has just opened everything up, it has changed the outlooks (sic) of how I see people, how I see life, everything; it has made me feel I am as good as everybody else, I have changed enormously; I have just moved on.* Clare

> *With my missed education, I thought [that essay mark] is a fluke...I was pleased with that fluke, then 'hang on, this is two flukes in a row! Is this possible?' It was almost like a flower growing.* Tina

These quotes are from participants whose talk coded as personal growth/change accounted for 38.7% (Sally), 26.5% (Clare) and 28% (Tina) of their interview. Overall, participants' utterances coded in this way ranged between 4% and 39% of their total

interview talk; these participants were particularly enthusiastic about the impact that studying with the OU had had on them. However, others who were less talkative were not necessarily less perceptive or analytical about themselves. Whilst Sally, Clare and Tina's talk may not have sacrificed quality for quantity regarding personal growth concepts, quality was also not missing where participants had less to say for themselves.

Evans (1995) suggests that part of the experience of becoming a student is 'forming an identity, as a student of a particular organisation' (p174). This is a huge task, which might be all the more challenging for these distance-learning students who may feel a sense of dislocation from their educational establishment or centre. A transition, such as re-entering any form of higher education as an adult, demands psychic reorganisation (Giddens, 1991). With the learning situated in the students' own front rooms, the enormity of the undertaking develops from a *transitional* experience to a *transformational* one. This links to Mezirow's view of education as a transformative experience.

This 'identity project' is brought with the study materials right in to the students' private, domestic sphere. This can mean for the student that there is little escape from the ensuing 'assault on the identity' (Harrison, 1993; Weil, 1986). 'Positive reinterpretation and growth' (Weisenberg, 2001, p37) appear to be the common way of coping with this:

> *Everyone I've spoken to perceives it as positive. I haven't spoken to anybody I don't think, that thinks it's negative. They're all like 'Ooh really! Oh, that's brilliant! That's great!' That makes you feel good as well.* Trish

A particularly apposite example is provided by Tina. That she had gained from the course in ways beyond increasing her academic self-esteem was clear. She was enthusiastic about the benefits that studying had brought her:

I did not think there would be any kind of long lasting impressions [from taking the course]...I didn't think that I would actually view things from a different angle...A year ago I would not have thought that the course would have done much other than give me some knowledge that might be useful at some time...I was pleased with that fluke [a good assignment mark], then, 'hang on, this is two flukes in a row, is this possible?' It was almost like a flower growing...It was like starting off with a parcel, unwrapping it half way and finding that you have got his big, empty box, because other people have said [negative] things, then you realise that it is all hot air, there is nothing in it. So throw away the box and do it yourself...I'm not lacking in initiative, I don't feel a failure, and that is all related to the OU...they are enabling me...In the past I went in [to a situation] with the role of being a single parent, now I go in as a role of student, as someone with brains...I think I am finally shaking it off...that I was the one that nobody paid any thought or attention to, because it was automatically assumed that she wouldn't get anywhere. I am actually feeling more grown up now than I did in my twenties and early thirties... I feel that I might not be as intelligent as the next person but that doesn't matter, it is what I do have and how I use it that counts...If I look at somebody, I am now not aiming to be them, I am aiming to be me and how I can do it...I can honestly say in the last few months I don't think 'I can't do it', I just do it. It is because of the OU...It has given me so much, this change of attitude inside you, you have got it, and you don't have to have a certificate to prove it.

9.6 Summary

To summarise, participants showed a greater propensity to self reflect at the post-test compared to at the pre-test. Significant others were referred to more in the post-test, and in a qualitatively different way. References to increased confidence were also marked. This term appears to be a way in which the lay-person can conceptualise and articulate notions of self-esteem. This suggests that further investigation into the relationship between confidence and self-esteem and how confidence may be captured and measured may be fruitful.

Personal growth was an especially salient topic in the post-test interviews. Students needed to draw on or develop the necessary personal resources to accommodate the mixture of responses demonstrated by significant others. Such successful adaptations, alongside coping with the new demands of studying, further fuelled positive feelings towards the self. The women's enthusiasm for studying, acknowledgment of their own abilities and recognition of their own personal growth were immense. Even if they were unable to articulate more precisely what they meant, the women spoke fulsomely of increases in self-confidence and of personal development. For some women, returning to education had indeed been a transformational event.

However, eight of the 31 women did not complete their course of study. Were such positive outcomes also reported by those students who withdrew from their course? The next section addresses this question.

9.7 Comparison between completers and withdrawers

The preceding analysis incorporates both those participants who saw their course through to the end (n=23) and those who withdrew part way (n=8). It is instructive to compare the post-test interview analysis of these two sub-groups.

Table 9.2: Comparison of percentage of utterances (post-test) between Completers and Withdrawers

	Completers			Withdrawers		
Code		**Mean**	**%**		**Mean**	**%**
Motivation	1	2.73	5.41	1	2.75	6.92
Age	2	0.45	0.9	2	0.13	0.31
Education	3	2.36	4.69	3	2.5	6.29
OU	4	5.18	10.3	4	3.75	9.43
Employment	5	1.55	3.07	5	1.38	3.46
Roles	6	1.09	2.16	6	0.63	1.57
Significant others	7	6.14	12.2	7	4.25	10.7
Anxiety	8	1.64	3.25	8	0.75	1.89
Regret	9	0.68	1.35	9	1	2.52
Self efficacy beliefs	10	0.77	1.53	10	1.13	2.83
Reflections on self	11	10.82	21.5	11	9	22.6

Meaning of success	12	0.05	0.09	12	0.5	1.26
Personal growth/Change	13	10.82	21.5	13	6.63	16.7
Questions to researcher	14	0.14	0.27	14	0	0
Researcher replies	15	0.14	0.27	15	0	0
Hope/Enjoyment	16	2.27	4.51	16	1.38	3.46
Confidence	17	2.55	5.05	17	4	10.1
Family culture	18	1.05	2.07	18	0.25	0.63

This suggests there is very little difference between the talk of those who completed their course and those who withdrew. Of note though, are the codes of Personal Growth and Confidence (numbers 13 and 17 respectively). In comparison, completers talked more than withdrawers about personal growth issues, but withdrawers referred proportionally more to confidence.

It appears then, that the intervention – taking an OU course – although not completed, had the same effect in general for the withdrawers as for those who did complete their course of study. One anticipated outcome for those who left their course early is that self-esteem or confidence would be impacted upon in a negative manner. However, this is not borne out by the withdrawers' responses to the post-test interview questions. Utterances by the withdrawers relating to confidence accounted for 10% of the total coded talk, compared to 5% of the completers' talk. Further analysis of this content shows that the experience of studying, however quickly curtailed, did indeed serve to boost confidence.

> *I was so pleased with [essay result]; we went out for a drink to celebrate. I am more confident...just in myself, and I am not afraid to touch the computer...I am more confident in that way. It has made me stronger and confident in myself. It had a huge impact on me, it showed that I can do it, I am capable of doing it. I am more knowledgeable. I feel a bigger person. It was positive experience. It has made me search out for more. What I did do was fun and I gained a lot.* Bev, withdrew May, ex-partner's return upset balance in household, and academic level of course too high.

I take a lot of positive things from it...I did really well, particularly essays for literature and poetry. I really enjoyed that, I got a lot from it ...Even though I didn't finish the course, I achieved what I wanted. I think, if anything, it has helped to focus my mind on what I really want to do...the bits [of the course] I enjoyed were very fulfilling. It gave me the confidence to say 'yes, I can do this'...Once I stated getting in to it I produced some really quite good work, so I was very, very pleased with this...It has had the effect that I want to go ahead and study with the OU. I am certainly keen to do that, it is a matter of finding the right course...Mostly it has left me with the impression that it is a very, very good thing to do, very worthwhile, and I found the whole experience very supportive. From my point of view very surprising, I surprised myself with what I could actually do. It was quite enlightening. Pat, withdrew May, due to husband's redundancy forcing her to increase her own amount of paid work; also did not enjoy course content.

It felt pretty good saying 'I'm studying for a degree, I'm a student'...It made me a little bit more confident, I think...I felt really confident when I got the [essays] back...At the beginning, when [the topic] was crime, it was very fulfilling...I've definitely gained. Sue, withdrew April, due to domestic commitments, lack of time and course content.

Once I started, it rekindled the desire in me to learn more things and find out more things, and I have been doing a lot of that even though I have not been doing the course...It has made me question things more, and what it is I am capable of doing and what other people think of me ...Doing the course has given me more confidence...[studying with the OU] changed, generally, my attitude, opening my brain up and starting to make it tick properly. Liz, withdrew June, due to pressures of full-time job and organising a wedding.

My confidence increased... I had actually proved something to myself...It had a very positive impact on me. I would have liked to have continued, if circumstances had allowed. I think it would have made a tremendous difference, on a personal level...it was a very positive experience. Val, withdrew April, due to work commitments.

The acquisition or retention of confidence appears to play a key role for these women and for mature students generally (Calder, 1993, p132). Judgements about the worth of the learning experience may be partially based on how levels of confidence have been increased. However, completers spoke more of personal growth. What becomes apparent is that starting a course of study assists *confidence*, but it is the completion of that course which brings greatest benefits in *personal growth* terms.

This is important to the current research and has implications for wider concerns within the OU. Increasing focus has been placed on student attrition and a sense of urgency has surrounded establishing how drop-out can be prevented, or at least, the rate of drop-out slowed down. What is clear from these findings is that students who withdrew had nonetheless felt they benefited from their experience with the OU, however short-lived it may have been. As the above examples indicate, withdrawal was caused by non-academic reasons, rather than academic failure (Richardson, 1994). Indeed, the women had increased their confidence with regard to both their competencies as a student and more generally, and they had not been put off a further attempt at a later date of gaining a qualification. Personal growth, coming later in the course, might provide a valuable springboard from which to advise students about subsequent course choice. With the advent of named degrees within the OU, there is more written guidance for students about degree paths, but this indication of students' apparent personal growth may assist in any personal discussions between tutors and students regarding choices of higher level courses.

Clearly what is of significance is the *quality* of the students' experience with the OU. For all the participants in the current research, completers and withdrawers alike, this had been favourable. Verbal reports of the study experience, significant others' reactions and introspection provided crucial data for this research. To what extent, then

did the interview aspect of this study answer the research questions? The following section considers this.

9.8 Value of the Interviews to this research

The questions this research sought to address were:

- How does returning to education impact of women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

It has already been indicated that, via the interviews, the women stated that returning to education had a huge impact on the ways in which they viewed themselves. The process of talking with the researcher, putting past experiences into words (i.e. reflection on self in an interview situation) had the outcome of leading to a new vantage point on the self (Pals, 2001, p90). The impact of seeing oneself in a new way may in turn have led to a change in behaviour and 'in personality functioning'. This is referred to as the narrative revision of identity. Thorne and Klohnen (1993) speak of the value for personality development of talking about memories to other people:

> *People who choose to keep events to themselves may be less likely to grow from the experience because they do not get the kinds of reciprocal feedback that bring alternative interpretations to the experience.*

This is relevant to this discussion; although it has been pointed out earlier that the interview, despite being 'a conversation with a purpose' (Bingham and Moore, 1959), does not follow the conventions of a normal conversation (i.e. a lack of reciprocation on the part of the interviewer), the voicing of opinions about oneself may lead to a revision

in identity. This is because putting thoughts and experiences into words engenders an emotional reorganisation of self-understanding (Pals, 2001).

This is one of the strengths of the interview technique for this research: talking about one's experiences and oneself in the interview situation provides the opportunity to view personal events as if from a third party vantage point. 'Watching oneself' (Caspi, 2001) in this way can act as a mechanism of change. Such visualisation is a powerful tool that enables people to process information about the world and themselves, and, for the women in this study, new ways of dealing with situations were envisaged and put into place. As well as providing an opportunity to reflect on past and current events, the interview situation may have helped the participants think about or imagine how they *could* be, giving the brain a description of what they would like to be like (Cohen and Cummings, 2001).

This suggests that just by participating in the research, the participants stood to benefit. Knowing that they would be interviewed a second time may have encouraged the women to think more deeply about themselves, both in the intervening months and especially at the time of the second meeting. The interview itself may have brought about 'insight, self awareness' and, ultimately, 'a strengthened sense of self' (King, 1996, p183). The impact, then, of participating in research of this nature may itself warrant further research. This also underlines the importance to distance learning students of contact with others through self-help groups or tutor-counselling, and raises issues regarding 'the loneliness of the long distance learner' (Pugliese, 1995).

Even by itself, returning to education can be a powerful emotional event, a catalyst for sustained 'emotional/cognitive work', which results in the integration of new ways of thinking about oneself into identity. The interviews conducted with the women in this research were successful in highlighting that re-entering education increased their self-awareness and their self–esteem. However, returning to education

should not be viewed 'as a simple linear progression towards surer self-image, greater confidence...and personal agency' (West, 1996, pix). Rather than developing a more coherent sense of self, adult learners may experience processes in which the self becomes divided. Nonetheless, in the current study, the participants' (limited number of) references to conflicting roles do not bear this out, although role contagion (Home, 1998) was evident for some participants in the pilot study. As well as being the catalyst for personal change (see above), education offered a supportive space during periods of profound change and uncertainty (West, *ibid,* px). This was particularly the case for two participants, both of whom were single mothers, having recently separated from their partners; this information would not have been obtained from any of the other research tools. 'Empty-nesters', those older women whose adult children had left home, spoke of how studying provided a focus; education was an emotional and intellectual resource that helped participants move on. Again, this information would not have been forthcoming outside the interview situation.

The interview, then, appears to have been valuable in this research for delving into the impact that returning to education had on the participants' sense of self; the interview situation itself may have contributed to shifts in perception. Two women emphasised how they had looked forward to the researcher's return visit and how they had found talking about issues had clarified them in their own minds. However, the open format of the interview meant that the participants were free to pursue topics of particular salience to them, which may not have coincided with the research aims.

This technique was less successful than the other research instruments for pinpointing more exactly levels of self-esteem, but qualitative data in the form of positive feedback and obvious enthusiasm compensated for this. The objective of using this method was in any event to substantiate and expand upon data obtained by other means. This technique was useful for revealing that the influence of significant others

could, however, be either positive or negative. An interesting finding from the interviews was that, rather than being 'minimally conducive to study' (Garner, 1990), children could be a source of encouragement and support. The impetuses given for returning to education were varied. Because they often gave more than one reason, it was difficult to categorise the women from what they said as goal- or validation-seekers. A more precise tool appears necessary to isolate this particular characteristic.

The final research question relates to the most suitable research method for investigating self-esteem. The examples from Sally, Clare and others in preceding sections indicated that the interview provided a means of directly accessing the ways the participants perceived themselves. However, the tendency for participants to 'tidy up the self-image they present, to show it as a state of being rather than as a state of always becoming: to see themselves as encapsulated and unique wholes, rather than as playing half-learned roles to a half-comprehending audience' (Pascall, 1993, p80), added to the difficulty of the analysis. Nonetheless, via the post-test interview, the women demonstrated that the way in which they viewed themselves changed over the period of their studies, although the women did not refer directly to self-esteem. These particular participants readily attributed their personal growth to returning to study. In common with other participants, they acknowledged that they gained in terms of academic knowledge, but particularly emphasised benefits in other, if not all, areas of their lives. This insight was not available from any of the other instruments, and underlines the importance of the interview technique. However, it is still not the most appropriate method for research of this type on its own. A comparison with the findings from the other research instruments, and thus an appropriate research instrument, is given in section 10.3 of Chapter 10.

9.9 Conclusion

The philosophical perspectives underlying the interview aspect of this research were of two types. The 'first order' was concerned with statistical analysis, and identified and quantified the concepts apparent in the participants' responses to the interview questions. This analysis indicated that reflections on self, significant others, motivation and personal growth were salient concepts in the pre-test. Confidence and personal growth took on greater significance in the post-test. The 'second order' perspective focused on the participants' experience of education, highlighting their perceptions and values. This perspective also demonstrated the shifts in perception that occurred over the duration of the research. In addition, this method provided a means of triangulation by comparing results with the data obtained from the other research tools.

The interview data was especially useful for demonstrating the interrelationship of the various categories. Despite being a notion frequently encountered in everyday use, self-esteem is an awkward psychological concept, tricky to understand and rationalise. Participants nonetheless spoke, with varying degrees of lucidity, about issues relating to self-perception and self-worth, often in the guise of 'confidence'. Conceptualising it as 'confidence' may provide the lay-person with a way into thinking about notions of self-esteem; alternatively, the professional interpretation itself should be examined and reinterpreted. The women articulated their thoughts about the education process and the impact it had had on them and contextualised it with reference to their own motivations and to significant others. These topics – self-esteem, significant others and goal orientations – are difficult to discuss separately, and the interview allowed the weaving together of several threads.

Although an objective at the outset of the research was to avoid post-hoc rationalisation, the interview data illustrated how the experience of education and new-found skills were used by the participants to re-evaluate themselves. Putting past and

recent experiences into words appears to have led to a new vantage point on the self and to subsequent changes in personality functioning (Pals, 2001, p90). The interview data demonstrated the women's capacity for identity narrative revision. However, some participants had difficulty in articulating their thoughts on such a personal topic as self-perception. Whether this reticence was related to the research topic itself, to the falseness of the interview situation, or to individuals' predispositions towards 'opening up' should be investigated in any future studies of this nature. Unless participants are able (and willing) to talk about self-esteem and related concepts, the interview is a less than satisfactory research technique. For some women, however, this whole issue may have been painful to talk about.

The ways in which the participants had changed were greater than the sum of the parts. For a few, notably Clare and Sally, re-entering education had brought about a transformation within themselves which they had not anticipated but which they welcomed wholeheartedly. Personal development on this scale was not reflected in their scores on the other research instruments. This further underlines the value of the interview technique in research of this type. The participants were enthusiastic in their support for returning to education, and even those women who had not completed their course of study were convinced of the personal benefits re-entering education brought.

The value of the interview method to research of this nature is clear: despite some reticence and lack of articulation, the women were unanimous in stating that returning to education had had a profound effect on their sense of self. This was manifested in increased confidence and in recognition of having developed or changed on a personal level. The interview technique was valuable because it picked up this new notion of personal growth. None of the other tools were able to show this so unambiguously. The overriding point to emerge from the analysis of the interview data was that, for the majority of women, their perceptions of their own abilities had shifted

from a precarious reliance on luck or, to quote Tina, on 'flukes' to being grounded in reliable personal attributes. Tina succinctly encapsulated this in her simile of 'a flower growing'.

Self-esteem appears to be a subtle notion and elusive of analysis. Used in conjunction, however, the four research tools illuminated this intriguing facet of the self, and shed light on the intertwined concepts of significant others and goal orientations. In the final chapter, all the research for this thesis is drawn together; the limitations and implications are pointed out, and an overall summary given.

10: Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This final chapter summarises the achievements and limitations of the research. It offers a comparison between the merits of the various instruments used for this research. The implications of the findings for re-entry students are outlined and the chapter concludes by suggesting areas worthy of further investigation.

10.2 Achievements of this thesis

This thesis was concerned with two, interlinked strands. One issue was concerned with the impact of returning to education on women's self-esteem, and the other was finding an appropriate methodology to investigate these changes in self-esteem. The research questions were:

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?
- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?
- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

The research explored whether the most salient features of self-esteem, namely significant others and goal orientation, were of primary importance. Two particular achievements are associated with this thesis:

- A methodology to investigate the nebulous concept of self-esteem and the related issues of significant others and goal orientation within the context of re-entering education was devised.

- Another achievement can be seen in the results obtained via the various tools. Whilst it may not have been the participants' self-esteem *per se* that increased over the course of the research, what comes across most forcibly is that many of the women participants considered re-entering education to have been instrumental in promoting personal development and growth. These findings lead to challenge the definition of self-esteem, and impact on it of re-entering education.

One of the main objectives in this research was to chart changes in self-esteem. A review of the literature revealed that certain scales or instruments, such as the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) were available as 'off the shelf' tools to measure this concept. A critical review indicated that methodological problems might arise, however, using only one of these research tools. An examination of comparative methodologies suggested that different methods, in the form of a Q sort and the Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) would provide greater insight. This thesis has demonstrated how a mixed method approach to research of this type can be the most profitable. The findings from the pilot and main studies, are summarised in the following section.

10.3 Summary of the research findings

10.3.1 Findings from the pilot study

The aims of the pilot study were twofold: to explore how returning to education affected women students' perceptions of themselves; and, secondly, to test whether the research instruments (the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI), the Q sort and the Ideal Self inventory (ISI)) gave appropriate feedback. This study was conducted with women full-time undergraduates at a conventional university and with women full-time Access students. The findings indicated that:

- The students' self-esteem increased over the duration of the study
- Perceptions of self changed to incorporate a more positive view
- The SEI, Q sort and ISI each uncovered different facets of self-esteem. A further method, an interview, was considered to be a way of triangulating and expanding upon this data.

In the light of this, the main study also incorporated a general interview guide approach.

10.3.2 Findings from the main study

The research questions in the main study expanded, to include the question 'What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions' as self-esteem? This time, the research was conducted with women part-time distance learners, at the Open University, and not with students attending conventional universities. The main findings from the four research methods can be summarised as follows:

- SEI: Four fifths of the participants showed an increase on their SEI scores between the pre- and post-tests. There were statistically significant increases in overall self-esteem for the participants aged 30-45 years and those with low and high previous educational qualifications (PEQ). Increases on the Academic subscale were also significant, but there was no correlation on this subscale with age or PEQ. Withdrawing from a course did not have a detrimental effect on self-esteem.
- Q sort: Changes in self-perception were made apparent via the Q sort. Trends in sortings were identified which mapped onto the women's SEI scores. Women with high self-esteem, as measured by the pre-test SEI, and positive self-regard at the pre-test Q sort maintained and built on these over the duration of the

research. Students with lower self-esteem, and those who withdrew from their course, also showed positive changes in their self-regard.

- ISI: The ISI revealed increases in the women's self-esteem, including those who withdrew from their course. Despite the difficulties that some women had in meeting the task demands, this tool provided insights into the idiosyncratic ways in which the women construed their notions of self. An important finding was that an increase in confidence was a key issue for many, after returning to study.
- Interview: Quantitative analysis of the interview data revealed the most salient concepts relating to self-esteem. These were the role of significant others, motivation (or goal orientation) and personal growth. Issues of increased confidence and personal growth were especially prominent at the post-test phase of the investigation. Both those who completed and withdrew from their courses were keen to point out the central role that studying had played in feelings of increased self-worth.

This summary demonstrates that each of the tools suggested that increases in self-esteem or positive changes to self-perception occurred over the duration of the research. The next section considers the relative merits of the various research instruments.

10.4 Comparison between the research instruments

10.4.1 Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) and the interview

The results from the SEI suggested that 80% of participants showed a gain in overall self-esteem, and academic self-esteem was also boosted. In the interview, the women spoke with pride of the study skills they had acquired over the duration of their course, and the ways in which they had developed and changed more generally were

particularly remarked upon. Despite the fact that this measure also recorded a slight drop in overall self-esteem for four students, participants' talk generally focussed on the personal benefits they had gained by re-entering education.

Viv and Tina were two of the four whose post-test SEI scores were lower than those for the pre-test. Their comments in the interview, however, did not equate with their SEI results. Although Viv remained tentative in her self-belief, she nonetheless gave the impression of having moved on from when she had started her course:

> *I have had to go to college [tutorials] on my own. I have been there on my own and that is a big achievement for me...I would never have applied for [promotion] if I had not started [the OU]...It has given me that boost to have a go...It has given me a bit more confidence...I did not think I could do it; I thought the Open University was for other people, I did not think it was for people like me...I was quite shocked when I put in essays and when they came back I got over 50.*

In complete contrast to what her SEI results may have suggested, Tina was effusive and enthusiastic in her comments about her experience of studying:

> *The studying has taken over a large chunk of my life...I don't just switch off now, I think like this. I am proud of my OU work; taking this course has given me more confidence in studying and potential to adding new skills (sic)...I did not think there would be any kind of long lasting impressions...I didn't think I would actually view things from a different angle...If I had a friend who was [a single parent in a high-rise flat] and wanted to break out of it, I would say 'this is the way to do it'...[the OU] is enabling me...In the past, I went in with the role of being a single parent, now I go in as a role of student...I am not going to feel distraught if I don't pass the exam. It has already given me so much.*

This suggests that although the SEI gave some indication of changes to self-esteem, it offered only a limited picture. The interviews went beyond this, permitting the students to focus on what in the studying experience was salient to them. In addition, they could expand and explicate upon their own perceptions of self. Those whose post-test SEI

scores had reduced were nonetheless able to talk about issues relating to self-esteem and spoke quite emphatically about how they had benefited personally from returning to study. It would appear that a 'reduced' self-esteem score (as measured by the SEI) is not linked to subjective reports of levels of self-esteem. Indeed, the expansiveness of the women's talk generally suggests that it is something other than self-esteem that is affected by the experience of studying.

10.4.2 Q sort and the interview

The Q sort was intended to overcome the narrow focus of the SEI, through investigating the participants' idiographic perspectives on themselves. Comparison between the accounts generated at the pre- and post-tests showed that women with high self-esteem or positive self-regard maintained and capitalised on that. Women with lower self-esteem also appeared to demonstrate positive changes in their self-perception at the post-test.

Again, these findings are supported by the interview data. As has already been shown, the women spoke, often eloquently, about the ways in which they perceived they had changed over the course of their studies, and frequently attributed these changes to the process of re-entering education. What is important here, and has been highlighted in sections 7.9 of Chapter 7, 8.7 of Chapter 8 and 9.7 of Chapter 9, is that it is the participation in and not the completion of a course of study that has a positive impact on self-regard. As the interview data in particular demonstrates, taking on the challenge of returning to education and overcoming the associated risks is worth it for the personal benefits it brings. This is even the case for those who withdrew part way through their course.

The Q sort was able to indicate the common ways in which sub-groups of women perceived themselves. However, it could not provide answers as to the factors

behind those perceptions. For example, one aspect brought to the fore by the Q sort was the feelings of anxiety that a subgroup of women experienced. The Q sort by itself was not able to uncover the causes of that anxiety, but in the course of the interviews, women disclosed some of their fears and worries. These anxieties were connected to both their abilities as students and their approach to life more generally. The post-test interview data showed how many of those anxieties had been allayed; even limited success (in the women's and not the OU's terms) served to counteract feelings of inadequacy and unease:

> *I did feel under pressure, but it was only because I didn't understand all what they were asking me. I had to keep going back on everything...I had to break it down into sections. It was difficult, but I thoroughly enjoyed it... it showed me that I can do it, that I am capable of doing it.* Bev, withdrew April

> *As it got closer to the assignment due date and I wasn't up to date with the work, I'd be short with [son]. I realised he was more important than the course...I now know that I can keep up with the work. I would try another course.* Ann, withdrew August

This second example shows the way in which interviews can highlight inherent contradictions. One of Ann's reasons for withdrawing from the course was that she could not cope with the volume of work and her domestic responsibilities; yet she stated shortly afterwards that her experience with the OU had proved to her she could manage. Although contradictory statements were aligned with one another in the Q sort, the interview provided opportunities for discussion and such ambiguities made more sense when encountered within this context, where participants used their own words.

10.4.3 Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) and the interview

This criticism, that the SEI and Q sort did not use participants' own words, was countered by the use of the ISI. Again, this tool showed that the women increased in

self-esteem over the duration of the research project. The interviews substantiated the findings of the ISI, and in particular with regard to gains in confidence, for both completer and withdrawer sub-groups. Whilst the ISI purported to allow the women freedom to demonstrate how they perceived themselves, the much looser format of the interview gave them greater scope to expand upon the topics that were of importance to them. The post-test interview provided the opportunity to discuss the continued salience of the constructs that had been generated for the ISI at the pre-test stage. Most women agreed that the constructs that had been elicited continued to be relevant to them. None expressed surprise at their list, unlike Marion from the pilot study, who did not recognise the concepts as her own, nor fell on it with alacrity, unlike Helen who stated 'oh yes, this is me, this is definitely what I'm like!'

Particularly of note is the correspondence between the dominant themes that arose in the ISI and the interviews. Intrapersonal skills and traits, interpersonal roles and relationships and academic/employment issues were salient in the ISIs, and these themes recurred in the interviews. Of especial salience in the ISI was the concept of 'confidence'. This was also an important topic in the interviews. Using the latter instrument, the women were able to expand upon their perceptions regarding themselves in relation to this concept, and indicated why they thought their confidence was low, and how re-entering education had impacted upon it. They were also able to explain the role that significant others played in affecting their confidence.

Indeed, in the interviews, references to significant others were key. This, however, contrasts with the ISI. Although significant others were included in the 'interpersonal roles and relationships' category of the ISI, this concept did not feature so highly (see figure 8.1, section 8.4 of Chapter 8). This is an important point when considering self-perception and self-esteem; throughout the literature, significant others have been shown to play a central role in the development and maintenance of self-

esteem. No thorough investigation, then, would overlook this crucial component; unlike the ISI, in the interviews the women were able to focus on this aspect.

There were, however, benefits to each of the research tools. The next section highlights the significance of the research findings.

10.5 Relevance of the findings to re-entry students' self-esteem

Analysis of the data generated provides some answers to the research questions.

- How does returning to education impact on women students' sense of self, particularly regarding self-esteem?

It indicates that a positive change in the women students' sense of self occurred. This change was not restricted, however, to increases in self-esteem. The SEI suggested that self-esteem increased over the duration of the research, but the other tools indicated that change was more holistic in nature. However, with the exception of the interview, the research instruments were unable to pinpoint precisely if such changes were because of returning to education. The qualitative aspect of the interviews was fundamental for attributing these changes to the education process, and the multiple operationalism adopted in this research was important for uncovering the various – and new – facets of self-esteem.

The second research question was:

- What roles in this do significant others and goal orientation play?

The SEI did not address aspects relating to significant others and goal orientation; its primary function was to record objectively baseline and subsequent levels of self-esteem. Allowing a subjective approach, the Q sort pointed to the women's motivations for study. However, it could not uncover the relationship between self-esteem, significant others and goal orientation. The ISI, on the other hand,

provided further subjective accounts of self-perception to be generated, but the idiosyncratic nature of this exercise meant that the participants did not keep the topic of significant others, nor indeed of returning to education, in focus. In an indirect way, goal orientations however could be uncovered, but their relationship to returning to education and to self-esteem was not made explicit. It was only in the interviews that the particular roles of significant others and goal orientation were made clear.

From their talk, the women indicated that family members, friends and colleagues all contributed to the way in which the students perceived themselves. Views on self and of ability could have their foundations in comments made in the past, by parents or teachers, and present encouragement or criticism was still taken very much to heart. Partners or other important people could provide the push to embark on study; some women returned to or continued with their studies despite the views of others. The comments, actions or behaviour of significant others relating to issues of studying could have either positive or negative impacts on the students. Children could be a particular source of support, which added to the students' positive self-regard.

This addresses the third research question, which was:

- What is the most suitable research method for investigating such imprecise notions?

The above suggests that there is no one research instrument which can precisely capture and measure notions of self-esteem when related to returning to education, significant others and goal orientation. The mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative reports, attempts to provide both objective and subjective indices, but the open-ended nature of the interview gives the fullest account of the factors at play. Although an objective of the research was to avoid post-hoc rationalisation, the participants' self-reflections provided the best indication of what returning to education, significant others and motivation meant *to them.* This is surely

the criterion on which research into the student experience should be based. Indeed, the quantitative results for some participants (e.g. Clare and Sally, see section 9.9, Chapter 9) contradicted the qualitative data generated in the interview. Table 10.1 on the following page summarises the merits and limitations of each instrument for the current research.

As the research progressed, this third question itself took on greater significance. It became apparent that a focus on the means of data collection is as important as the data itself. Consequently, there was a subtle shift in the emphasis of the aims of the research to reflect this fundamental issue. This means that methodology issues deserve further attention. The following section looks at these more closely.

10.6 Methodology considerations

The research outlined in this thesis did not follow the classical experimental design, where the effect of an independent variable (i.e. returning to education) was tested. There was no control group that was *not* subjected to the independent variable. In any event, it would have been impossible, given the temporal limitations of the PhD schedule, to have found cohorts that were matched in terms of age, socio-economic background and educational level, even if this information was readily available. Therefore, causality for apparent changes in self-esteem cannot be applied.

The purpose of the Self Esteem Inventory was to provide an objective benchmark against which data from other sources could be compared. It was straightforward and unproblematic for the participants to complete. The Q sort, on the other hand, did not set out to measure anything objectively; rather, it offered participants the opportunity to express their viewpoint or 'version of reality' (Stainton Rogers, 1991, p129). The data thus gathered could 'lead in quite different directions' (Brown, 1980, p39) to that intended, opening up further avenues for research. The traits

Table 10.1: Summary of success of each instrument for meeting the research objectives

Instrument	Objectives: Showed how returning to education impacts on sense of self	Objectives: Showed roles played by by significant others and goal orientation	Method strengths	Limitations
Self Esteem Inventory	Recorded increases and decreases in self-esteem. Greatest increases apparent on academic sub-scale. If attributable to returning to education unclear.	Not addressed by this instrument.	Gave numerical measure of self-esteem, allowing swift comparison between pre- and post-tests	Test-retest reliability. Rigid, but too broad-based for this research.
Q sort	Suggested self-regard more positive at post-test. If attributable to returning to education unclear.	Significant others not highlighted. Motivations made more apparent.	Participants in control of classification process. Ipsative, but group trends highlighted.	Research topics possibly too diverse for this method.
Ideal Self Inventory	Showed increases in self-esteem but not if attributable to education process. 'Confidence' as a key issue	Influence of significant others and goal orientations not made explicit	Used participants' own words. Flexible	Task demands too difficult
Interviews	Qualitative differences in self-perception overtly stated in post-test.Particpants spoke of increased confidence and of personal growth. Directly attributed to returning to education	Significant others shown as having both positive and negative impact. Children as source of support. Motivations for returning to study given, but no clear distinction between growth- and validation-seeking goal orientations	Rich qualitative data. Subjective reports. Changes in self perception manifested. Participants' reasons and explanations could be probed. Triangulation with other data. Confidence a major preoccupation.	Problems of articulation for some participants. Subjective interpretation by researcher.

generated in the ISI could be interpreted in two ways, as descriptions of behaviour or as legitimate and useful explanations for individual differences (Furnham, 1999). One of the intentions in using this tool was to tap into the discrepancies between participants' real- and ideal-selves, and thus to glean an indication of levels of self-esteem. In the current research, the interview data was used to both back up and expand upon the interpretations drawn from the other research tools. However, the interview alone provided a means of beginning to investigate causality; the participants spontaneously attributed personal changes to the educational process.

Such 'method triangulation' is achieved by the use of different vantage points, allowing illumination of a research topic from multiple standpoints. It reflects a commitment to thoroughness, flexibility and differences of experience (Tindall, 1994). Triangulation is drawn from the idea of 'multiple operationism' which suggests that the validity of findings and the degree of confidence in them will be enhanced by the use of more than one approach to data collection. However, the combination of qualitative and quantitative for triangulation is not unproblematic. Bryman (1992) raises several points in this regard:

- Is the multiple operationism appropriate?

Self-administered questionnaires (i.e. the SEI and the ISI) were intended to capture and thus to triangulate core concepts; they had similar aims (to generate measures that could be analysed statistically) and were broadly comparable. However, the quantitative approach emphasises causality, variables and a pre-structured approach to research, but the qualitative approach (i.e. the interview) is concerned with the elicitation of participants' perspectives, process and contextual detail. According to Bryman, the data may not be as comparable as 'triangulation' implies; he questions whether qualitative and quantitative research are tapping the same things even when they are examining apparently similar issues. However, the point of using both methods in the current

research was, as stated above, to provide additional as well as confirmatory data. Another question Bryman poses is:

- If the quantitative and qualitative evidence do not coincide, which should be taken as the more credible?

Qualitative investigations involve researchers in getting closer to their participants and being sensitive to context; these attributes tend to breed greater confidence in the validity of the qualitative data over that of the quantitative. The trustworthiness of qualitative data by this token appears somewhat arbitrary. Here again, Bryman is focusing on congruence between the various data sets. The interviews in the current research added depth and breadth to the quantitative analyses and the participants were eager to point out the relationship between enhanced self-regard and returning to education. Along similar lines, however, Bryman also asks:

- What implications do conflicts in results have?

The findings of one set of data rarely precisely confirm another set; as this research has shown, the interpretation of results from one research tool is highly likely to diverge from that of a second set. By its very nature, it was probable that the interview would generate more detailed and subjective data than the SEI, for example; indeed this was the rationale behind combining different research methods. Bryman's use of the term 'conflict' is perhaps disingenuous. As Burman suggests:

> *The holding [and interpretation] of inconsistent, contradictory views is not necessarily a function of faulty reasoning [or research], but rather may be a reflection of real contradictions and complexities* (Burman, 1994, p50) (Phrases in parentheses added.)

The results generated by the different tools do not necessarily incorporate the tension Bryman's term implies. Rather than being conflicting or contradictory, the results from the current research are complimentary.

All methods have their limitations, and the danger of using just one method is that the findings may be just an artefact of that method. The validity of using different approaches, as in the current research, is that not only do the various findings provide breadth and depth of understanding, they also illuminate gaps in understanding of the research topic and thus provide a springboard for further research. Topics worthy of further investigation are indicated in section 10.9. The following section outlines the implications of the findings of this research.

10.7 Implications

This research has provided additional data regarding the growth in self-esteem of re-entry women students. It has concluded that re-entering education may result in far-reaching personal changes. It appears, however, that it was not so much the acquisition of the academic-related skills, valuable though they may be, that was important to the participants, but how they permeated into and impacted upon the women's every-day lives. Returning to education exposed the women to new ways of thinking, on both micro and macro levels, but especially opened them up to different perspectives on the self. Importantly, however, this could be seen as just one stage in their development, moving along the epistemological scales (Belenky *et al*, 1986; Baxter Magolda, 1992). Some women had regularly been involved in various academic or vocational adult education classes – Viv could be termed a lifelong learner in the sense that she had barely been out of a school since she left it – but intellectual stimulation had been a catalyst for personal development and inspiration.

This indicates that there are other important factors at play for re-entry students, beyond the employment advantages that a better education has been promoted as providing. The women in this study have demonstrated that they are more often motivated to return to education by intrinsic rather than extrinsic means. Although one

stated incentive for returning to education may be to 'get a better job', an implicit but more pertinent reason may be in personal development terms. Consequently, education providers' market-led approach, dominated by the volume of students, low attrition rates and high course pass rates, may be misguided. Evaluating the success of a course by student numbers, their staying power and academic ability may be to overlook a different but crucial interpretation of what constitutes success. The withdrawers in this study all talked in terms of what they had achieved and of their successes; none felt their foray into the Open University had been a waste of time or put them off further attempts at study.

At the post-test interview, some participants referred to increasing tension between themselves and other family members. This was an unanticipated aspect of returning to study. Dealing with changes within themselves was one thing, but coping with new conflicts within the home was another. There is little offered in the way of support for such matters; the OU would be seen as an obvious place to which the student could turn for advice regarding academic concerns, but there is no forum for discussion of worries of a more personal nature. Although promoting personal growth may already feature on the 'hidden agenda' of courses for re-entry students, the negative aspects associated with it deserve more prominent treatment. The value to students of University-provided support systems should not be overlooked.

This thesis began by introducing the notion that successive governments recognise 'that knowledge is the passport to prosperity and social stability' (Dunne, 1999, p130), and that a well-educated work force brings larger returns to *social* capital. (Chapter 2, section 2.2). For countries to survive and flourish as part of the global village, they must become learning societies. For this to be achieved, 'lifelong learning' is an essential requirement; and the development of lifelong learning skills should be incorporated into academic courses available to adults. The focus in this research has

been the accumulation, not of social capital, but of *individual* educational capital, and the benefits returning to education brings on a personal level. Part of this private gain was seen in terms of increased academic self-esteem, and reports of personal development of a more holistic nature. Perhaps those students most likely to maintain or increase their feelings of self-worth are those who possess or acquire lifelong learning skills and attributes. Some of these skills have been identified as the ability to:

- Set realistic and personally meaningful learning goals
- Have well-developed reading, writing and study strategies
- Recognise and deal effectively with obstacles to learning

Included in lifelong learning attributes are:

- A belief in the self as a competent learner
- Meta-cognitive knowledge of personal strengths, weaknesses and preferred ways of learning
- Persistence in the face of difficulties (Dunne, 1999, p131)

One of the implications of the current research is that an integral, and explicit, part of academic courses should be the promotion of such skills and attributes. The development of high self-esteem should be as valuable a goal for educationalists as the development of intellectual skills (Lawrence, 2000), and this may most effectively be done by facilitating the development of learning strategies and problem solving skills in the academic arena. This research highlights that education impacts on the whole person and not just with the part known as the intellect. It suggests that an understanding of students' personalities is required so that a relationship can be established between tutor and student, so the former can help the latter develop the necessary lifelong learning (and personal) skills. This is where an appreciation of students' goal orientations is invaluable.

The Open University already incorporates study skills components into its courses. Such inclusion within the context of the discipline and using learning activities that are directly related to the content being learnt are the most effective way of helping students (Dunne, 1999). The success of this model counteracts the lack of face-to-face contact between student and tutor that is a defining feature of distance learning, which may prevent the development of a supportive relationship. However, the provision of face-to-face meetings goes some way to overcome this drawback; the timing, location and above all the promotion of tutorials should be such that they are easy and desirable for students to attend.

Enhancing the self-esteem of adult learners is often an implicit goal of education providers. This research has shown that, whilst not the aim of all re-entry students, increasing feelings of self-worth and developing on a personal level are frequent motivations for returning to education. Education providers and practitioners should make this objective more explicit, and make clear the manner by which their courses intend to achieve it.

This suggests there may be shortcomings in the provision of services to re-entry students. The following section outlines some shortcomings associated with this thesis.

10.8 Limitations

One shortcoming of this study may be the small sample size, and the self-selection process by which the participants were obtained. The study was dependent on students volunteering their involvement, and there were only limited windows of time in which participants could be recruited and 'tested'. The more self-sufficient, motivated and committed individuals may be more likely to choose to return to education (Carney-Crompton, 2002). The decision to assume the additional role of student may have been made by those with a particular awareness and a willingness to adapt to new demands.

Only those who felt competent to return without severely compromising their various roles and responsibilities may have made the timely decision to return to education; those who volunteered to participate in the research may be of a similar type. However, as stated in Chapter 1, women returners to education are not a homogeneous group, and the demographic profile of this sample bears this out.

The difficulty of defining and then testing the research topic and the rigidity of the SEI, Q sort and ISI may mean that perceptions about the self cannot be captured by these means. Beliefs about the self 'do not need to be encoded in words' (Mezirow and Associates, 2000, p5); rather, self-perceptions may be bound up with affect, meaning that even in the interview situation, how the participants feel about themselves may be difficult for them to articulate. Furthermore, the findings of this research are all based on the reports of the participants themselves; self-reports may be biased by the participants' implicit theories of personal change (Richardson, 2000). It has already been pointed out that one way of validating data is to use a variety of methods, but the integrity of the data remains a limitation of research of this type, i.e. to what extent the participants' responses are valid and reflect the topic under investigation. Another means of confirming the findings would have been to use data triangulation, where an indication of the participants' levels of self-esteem, for example, was obtained from other sources (Tindall, 1994). Including the reports or views of partners or tutors would have given additional perspectives.

The participants' apparent changes in self-esteem and their reported personal development may of course be due to factors other than returning to education. In a classic experimental design to test the effect of an independent variable (IV) (i.e. returning to education), there should be two groups; one which is exposed to the IV and one which is not (the control group). If the groups are matched in all respects except for the presence of the IV, then any difference between the two groups could fairly

confidently be attributed to the effect of the IV. However, there are obvious difficulties in obtaining a control group in research involving adults. Matching the controls in terms of gender and age may have been feasible, but to obtain participants who corresponded in terms of PEQ, income, domestic situation and so on would have been impossible. Consequently, the research was not based on the classic experimental paradigm and therefore attributing causality to returning to education (the IV) must be treated warily. However, as has been pointed out earlier, many participants did spontaneously attribute personal growth to following their course.

An additional consideration is the reliability of the quantitative instruments. The test-retest correlation of Battle's Self Esteem Inventory was .81 and it correlated 'significantly' with Coopersmith's Self-esteem Inventory (Battle, 1986); there were 'positive correlations' between scores on Norton's Ideal Self Inventory and on Coopersmith's inventory (Norton *et al*, 1995). This gives confidence in the use of these tools, and some participants returning lower scores, in the post-test SEI for example, may be attributable to issues of test-retest reliability. This highlights the complexity of this research. Attempting to investigate the intricate phenomenon of self-esteem and link it to other psychological concepts (i.e. goal orientation) and to the role played by significant others through the use of these probes may have been over-ambitious.

Nonetheless, the research revealed that what may be experienced by women returners to education is a fundamental change in the person. It also uncovered other avenues for further research.

10.9 Further research

The Self Esteem Inventory indicated that the participants in this research who came to the Open University with no CSEs or GCSEs, four or fewer GCSEs or 2 or more A levels, received the greatest boost to their self-esteem; and the increase in

Academic self-esteem was significant for the cohort as a whole. Returning to education enhancing the academic self-esteem of those with low previous qualifications (PEQ) appears to make sense (success on a recent programme of study contradicts negative perceptions of academic ability formed through earlier negative experiences), but the increase in academic self-esteem shown by the group with higher PEQs is not so easily understood. One area for further investigation might be to why this might be so. However, those re-entry students with a medium level of previous educational qualifications may still be in a state of flux regarding the self; this is another avenue for exploration.

However, the Impostor Phenomenon (Clance and Imes, 1978; Sonnak, 2001) was apparent in some of the participants in the pilot study (see Chapter 4, 4.7.2). The women who felt frauds were all married with dependent children, still living in the family home and had arrived at their 'local' university via an Access course. None of the single women who had come from other parts of the country and lived in college halls of residence nor 'local' single parents living 'out' (who had A levels or Access certificates) reported similar feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. More research might focus on the differences in emotional and academic experiences of married and lone mothers in the conventional university setting. What factors, other than having a husband, cause these women to doubt their abilities, despite evidence of their success? Are such women more likely to withdraw from their degree course?

In the main study, those students who did withdraw provided a comparison point with those who continued on their course. The data suggested that embarking on a course of study provided a modest increase in self-esteem, but it was the continued success on and the completion of the course that led to greater personal and psychological benefit. This raises issues such as: Is such personal growth a phenomenon restricted to the initial return to education? Do participants report a year-on-year

personal development as they progress with their educational career? What, too, is the impact on self-regard once the qualification (i.e. the degree) has been achieved and studying stops? Such questioning is not a one-sided affair, however. Investigating in closer detail their participants' reasons for questioning the researcher may shed further light on the student experience and on the epistemological development (see section 2.4.2.3, Chapter 2) of the students.

In the Ideal Self Inventory and the interviews, references to increased confidence were marked. It appears that this term, 'confidence', is used by the lay person to conceptualise and articulate notions of self-esteem. This suggests that further investigation into the relationship between confidence and self-esteem and how confidence may be captured and measured may be fruitful.

10.10 Summary

This chapter has outlined the achievements of this thesis and its findings. It has pointed out the implications of these findings for re-entry students and those who deliver courses to them, as well as the limitations of the research. Areas worthy of further investigation have also been highlighted.

Talking about identity formation, but equally relevant to this thesis, Josselson (1987) suggests that 'there is no one day when identity formation happens. The self is gradually modified so that one day one may look back and realise that one has changed inexorably, that one is different from how one used to be'. The participants in this research demonstrated that participating in formal education as an adult can have profound repercussions beyond the acquisition of academic qualifications. Whilst intrapersonal goal orientations are implicated in the outcome of the experience, interpersonal aspects, in the form of significant others, also have a part to play. That women returners to education experience unpremeditated and unexpected development,

in the form of personal growth, should be celebrated, not least by the women themselves, and also capitalised upon by providers in the field of adult education.

The present research, with a number of modest tests, has helped to make a first trial of a way of testing and describing the changes to self that occur on returning to education. Results suggest that his notion of personal growth can give some insight into the origins and structure of changes in self-esteem. Insofar as this is true, it provides a language for HE providers to think about the changes that occur to re-entry as opposed to conventional students. More importantly, however, may be the clarification of these ideas through further research, leading to these notions being amenable to independent testing.

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Participant
Date

Form SEI-A

Please mark each question in the following way:
If the question describes how you usually feel, place a tick in the 'yes' column.
If the question does not describe how you usually feel, place a tick in the 'no' column.
Please tick only one column for each question, either 'yes' or 'no'.
Don't spend too long thinking about your answer; your immediate reaction is what's required.

This is not a test; there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

		Yes	No
1.	Do you have only a few friends?	1	
2.	Are you happy most of the time?	2	
3.	Can you do most things as well as others?	3	
4.	At school, were you satisfied with your work?	4	
5.	Do you like everyone you know?	5	
6.	Do you spend most of your free time alone?	6	
7.	Do you like being female?	7	
8.	At school, did you usually give up when the work was too hard?	8	
9.	Do most people you know like you?	9	
10.	Are you usually successful when you attempt important tasks?	10	
11.	Have you ever taken anything that didn't belong to you?	11	
12.	Are you as intelligent as most people?	12	
13.	Do you feel you are as important as most people?	13	
14.	Are you easily depressed?	14	
15.	Would you change many things about yourself if you could?	15	
16.	At school, did you do as well as you wanted to?	16	
17.	Do you always tell the truth?	17	
18.	Are you as nice looking as most people?	18	
19.	Do many people dislike you?	19	
20.	Are you usually tense or anxious?	20	

Continued.....

	Yes	No
21. Are you lacking in self-confidence?	21	
22. Do you gossip at times?	22	
23. Do you often feel that you are no good at all?	23	
24. At school, were you a failure?	24	
25. Are you as strong and healthy as most people?	25	
26. Are your feelings easily hurt?	26	
27. Is it difficult for you to express your views or feelings?	27	
28. Do you ever get angry?	28	
29. Do you often feel ashamed of yourself?	29	
30. Are other people generally more successful than you are?	30	
31. Do you feel uneasy much of the time without knowing why?	31	
32. Would you like to be as happy as others appear to be?	32	
33. Are you ever shy?	33	
34. Do you feel a failure?	34	
35. At school, did you like it when the teacher asked you questions in class?	35	
36. Do people like your ideas?	36	
37. Do you find it difficult when meeting new people?	37	
38. Do you ever lie?	38	
39. Did you often feel like leaving school?	39	
40. Are you often upset about something?	40	
41. Do most people respect your views?	41	
42. Are you more sensitive than most people?	42	
43. At school, did you do the best you could?	43	
44. Are you as happy as most people?	44	
45. Are you ever sad?	45	
46. At school, did the teacher think you were not good enough?	46	
47. Are you definitely lacking in initiative?	47	
48. Do you worry a lot?	48	
49. Were you proud of the work you did at school?	49	

Thank you for your time.

Participant
Date

Form SEI-B

Please mark each question in the following way:
If the question describes how you usually feel, place a tick in the 'yes' column.
If the question does not describe how you usually feel, place a tick in the 'no' column.
Please tick only one column for each question, either 'yes' or 'no'.
Don't spend too long thinking about your answer; your immediate reaction is what's required.

This is not a test; there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

		Yes	No
1.	Do you have only a few friends?	1	
2.	Are you happy most of the time?	2	
3.	Can you do most things as well as others?	3	
4.	At college/the OU, are you satisfied with your work?	4	
5.	Do you like everyone you know?	5	
6.	Do you spend most of your free time alone?	6	
7.	Do you like being female?	7	
8.	At college/the OU, do you give up when the work is too hard?	8	
9.	Do most people you know like you?	9	
10.	Are you usually successful when you attempt important tasks?	10	
11.	Have you ever taken anything that didn't belong to you?	11	
12.	Are you as intelligent as most people?	12	
13.	Do you feel you are as important as most people?	13	
14.	Are you easily depressed?	14	
15.	Would you change many things about yourself if you could?	15	
16.	At college/ the OU, are you doing as well as you want to?	16	
17.	Do you always tell the truth?	17	
18.	Are you as nice looking as most people?	18	
19.	Do many people dislike you?	19	
20.	Are you usually tense or anxious?	20	

Continued...

		Yes	No
21. Are you lacking in self-confidence?	21		
22. Do you gossip at times?	22		
23. Do you often feel that you are no good at all?	23		
24. At college/ the OU, do you feel a failure?	24		
25. Are you as strong and healthy as most people?	25		
26. Are your feelings easily hurt?	26		
27. Is it difficult for you to express your views or feelings?	27		
28. Do you ever get angry?	28		
29. Do you often feel ashamed of yourself?	29		
30. Are other people generally more successful than you are?	30		
31. Do you feel uneasy much of the time without knowing why?	31		
32. Would you like to be as happy as others appear to be?	32		
33. Are you ever shy?	33		
34. Do you feel a failure?	34		
35. At college/the OU, do you like it when the tutor asks you questions in a tutorial?	35		
36. Do people like your ideas?	36		
37. Do you find it difficult when meeting new people?	37		
38. Do you ever lie?	38		
39. Have you often felt like stopping college/the OU?	39		
40. Are you often upset about something?	40		
41. Do most people respect your views?	41		
42. Are you more sensitive than most people?	42		
43. At college/the OU, are you doing the best you can?	43		
44. Are you as happy as most people?	44		
45. Are you ever sad?	45		
46. At college/the OU, does the tutor think you are not good enough?	46		
47. Are you lacking in initiative?	47		
48. Do you worry a lot?	48		
49. Are you proud of the college/OU work you are doing?	49		

Thank you for your time.

Key to statements

S	Social self-esteem)
G	General self-esteem) From Battle's SEI
A	Academic self-esteem)
P	Personal self-esteem)
GG	Growth-seeking goal orientation) Developed for
VG	Validation-seeking goal orientation) this sample
SO	Significant others)

	Pre-test Q sample		
1	I have only a few friends	1	S
2	I am happy most of the time	2	G
3	I can do things as well as others	3	G
4	At school, I was satisfied with my work	4	A
5	Studying will help me realise my potential	5	GG
6	I spend most of my free time alone	6	S
7	I like being female	7	G
8	At school, I usually gave up when the work was too hard	8	A
9	Most people I know like me	9	S
10	I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks	10	G
11	Developing new skills is the whole point of studying	11	GG
12	I am as intelligent as most people	12	S
13	I am as important as most people	13	G
14	I am easily depressed	14	P
15	There are many things I'd change about myself	15	G
16	At school, I did as well as I wanted	16	A
17	The personal challenge of studying is important	17	GG
18	I am as nice looking as most people	18	P
19	There are many people who dislike me	19	S
20	I am usually tense and anxious	20	P
21	I am lacking in self confidence	21	G
22	Completing this course willl give me more confidence	22	GG
23	I often feel I am no good at all	23	G
24	At school, I was a failure	24	A
25	I am as strong and healthy as most people	25	S
26	My feelings are easily hurt	26	P
27	It is difficult to express my views and feelings	27	G
28	I'm not worried about low marks so long as I learn from them	28	GG
29	I often feel ashamed of myself	29	G
30	Other people are generally more successful than me	30	G
31	I feel uneasy much of the time without knowing why	31	P
32	I'd like to be as happy as others appear to be	32	G
33	I'm taking this course to keep up with my friends/partner	33	VG
34	I feel I am a failure	34	G
35	At school, I liked it when the teachers asked me questions	35	A
36	People like my ideas	36	S
37	I find it difficult when meeting new people	37	G
38	I'm doing this course so people will think better of me	38	VG
39	I often felt like leaving school	39	A
40	I am often upset about something	40	P
41	Most people respect my views	41	S
42	I am more sensitive than most people	42	P
43	At school, I did the best I could	43	A

44	I am as happy as most people	44	G
45	Passing this course will prove my worth to others	45	VG
46	At school, the teachers thought I wasn't good enough	46	A
47	I am definitely lacking in initiative	47	G
48	I worry a lot	48	P
49	I was proud of the work I did at school	49	A
50	I'm aiming to do well so my tutor won't think badly of me	50	VG
51	Other members of my family always seem to do better than me	51	SO
52	I want my friends to think what I do is worthwhile	52	SO
53	What my partner thinks has a major impact on what I do	53	SO
54	The approval of my family, colleagues and tutor is important	54	SO
55	I'm a disappointment to my parents	55	SO
56	I'm concerned the tutor will think I'm not up to it	56	SO
57	I worry the other students won't like me	57	SO
58	Living up to others' expectations of me is hard	58	SO
59	Having a degree will increase my status in society	59	VG

Key to statements

S	Social self-esteem)	
G	General self-esteem)	From Battle's SEI
A	Academic self-esteem)	
P	Personal self-esteem)	
GG	Growth-seeking goal orientation)	Developed for
VG	Validation-seeking goal orientation)	this sample
SO	Significant others)	

Pre-test guide

1. What made you decide to start studying?
2. Why was now the right time?
3. Which course is it you're doing?
4. What was compulsory school like for you?
5. Do you wish you'd done a degree at the conventional time?
6. What do you think of the amount of time the studying will take up?
7. What are you most/least looking forward to about the course?
8. What's your husband's/family's view of you doing this?
9. Do you think doing this course will give you anything else apart from the academic qualification?

Post-test guide

1. Was returning to education something you *needed* to do, and if so, why?
2. What did you expect to gain by embarking on/gaining a degree?
3. Do you think studying for a degree has conferred more status on you? If so, in what ways?
4. Has studying for a degree given you more authority with others?
5. Is studying for a degree giving you a sense of self-fulfilment, and if so, in what ways?
6. Has being a student changed the way you behave generally?
7. Are you the first generation from your family of origin to study for a degree?
8. Does your husband have a degree?
9. Did/do you hope your children will go to university?
10. Has it influenced you relationships within you family, and if so, how?
11. Do you wish you'd studied for a degree at the conventional time? Why or why not?
12. What do you think studying for/having a degree does for people?
13. .... For you in particular?
14. Do you think studying with the OU has changed you in any way, and if so in how? Do you welcome this?
15. Is there anything about studying with the OU that stands out as being significant for you on a personal level?
16. Is it strange reflecting on these issues?

8th November 2000

Dear

I am a PhD student at the Open University. I am researching the impact that returning to degree-level study has on women students' perceptions of themselves. This work is intended to help institutions such as the OU plan their courses and/or student support systems to accommodate the needs of the mature women student. Your College Tutor, Dr X, is interested in and supports this research for its potential benefit to your own College. Student Y of your college's Students' Union also knows about the project.

I am interested in the experiences of women who are currently in their first term of an undergraduate degree, whose compulsory schooling ended some years ago. You have been selected as someone who meets these criteria; your particular experiences and viewpoint would be of the greatest use to this research. Would you be able to spare about an hour, to fill in a short questionnaire and complete two other related tasks? The project also involves repeating some of the tasks in the Spring Term. Any information would, of course, be treated as confidential and anonymous.

As someone who returned to education 15 years after leaving school myself, I appreciate how busy you are, but would really be grateful to hear your perspective on the difficulties or otherwise of returning to academic life. Additionally, your involvement in this research may impact on the university experiences of mature women students in future years. If you think you can help, or would like more information, please contact me as soon as possible. A meeting can be arranged any time up to the middle of December. I can be reached on (telephone number) or by email on w.m.knightley@open.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking time to read this; I hope to hear from you.

Wendy Knightley

Women Returning to Education Project

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. I am interested in the impact that returning to education has on women students' perceptions of themselves. The intention is that findings from this study will feed back into course planning and counselling provision, with particular regard to women students' needs.

All information you give will be treated confidentially; names and any other details which might identify you will be changed. Should there be any questions or aspects of the project which you would prefer not to answer or participate in, your wishes will be respected. You may withdraw from the project at any time. However, honest answers and your participation in the second phase of the study will, of course, be of most benefit to the research and ultimately to women students who follow you. The tasks should not take more than an hour and a half to complete.

In order to be able to match up the two phases of the study and to place the research in context, I need some personal details and information regarding your educational history. Please would you complete the following before proceeding?

Name ..... Date of Birth .....

Are you (please circle):

single married/living with partner separated divorced widowed ?

If you have children living at home, please give their ages .....

Your age on leaving compulsory/formal education .....

Qualifications gained by then .....

.....

Educational qualifications gained since .....

.....

What was your occupation on leaving school? .....

What is your occupation now? .....

Are you intending to study for a degree? (please circle) yes / no

Pilot study results

Participant	Self esteem Inventory sub scale scores								ISI	
	general 1	general 2	social 1	social 2	personal 1	personal 2	academic 1	academic 2	ISI 1	ISI 2
Clare	9	8	4	7	3	4	3	5	44	54
Marion	7	12	7	7	0	5	2	6	40	60
Helen	14	14	3	4	8	7	5	7	44	44
Felicity	9	12	8	8	2	4	5	5	54	44
Audrey	16	16	7	7	7	7	2	6	89	71
Anna	13	16	6	8	4	8	3	9	57	100
Emma	14	12	6	6	4	4	6	6	42	78
Louise	12	13	7	6	6	4	7	7	48	43
Sonia	10	14	8	6	6	5	0	9	85	67
Toni	15	13	8	7	5	8	5	6	54	71
Rebecca	16	16	8	7	7	6	4	9	57	51
Average	12.3	13.3	6.5	6.6	4.7	5.6	3.8	6.8	55.8	62.1

Marion's Pre-test Q sort

Least like me										Most like me
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
1	25	4	37	24	58	32	5	38	2	14
16	47	6	30	48	9	26	17	40	22	59
18	44	27	33	13	3	35	20	15	45	54
8	2	49	53	50	41	7	57	52	51	21
	43	19	55	39	11	31	42	10	23	
			46	36	29	56	8			
					34					

2nd January 2001

Dear

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study which aims at researching the impact that returning to degree level study with the Open University has on women's perceptions of themselves. This work is intended to help institutions such as the OU plan their courses and/or student support systems to better accommodate the needs of the mature woman student.

As part of the study, I would like to have contributions from women who are starting their first Level 1 course with the OU, whose compulsory schooling ended some years ago. You have been selected as someone who meets these criteria; *your* particular experiences and viewpoint would be of the greatest use to this research. I would like to contact *some* of this sample later this month. Would you be able to spare an hour or so, to fill in a short questionnaire and complete two other related tasks? The project also involves repeating some of the tasks towards the end of your course, in the autumn. Any information would, of course, be treated as confidential and anonymous.

As an OU graduate myself, I appreciate how much work embarking on an OU degree involves. But if you can find the time, I would be really interested to hear *your* perspective on combining studying with other aspects of your life. May I contact you to arrange a meeting? I live near Cambridge, but a meeting can be arranged at any location and time to suit yourself. If you prefer not to participate, please complete the attached form and return it to me in the enclosed pre-paid envelope as soon as possible. If I do not hear from you by *14th January 2001* I shall assume you would be interested in taking part and will contact you again. If you would like more information I can also be reached on [telephone number] or by email on w.m.knightley @open.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking time to read this, and good luck with your own studies!

Wendy Knightley

Continued.....

To: Wendy Knightley, Survey Office, IET, Open University,
PO Box 175, Milton Keynes MK7 6BR

I do not wish to participate in your research.

Name (Block capitals please)

.....

Pseudonym	Age (years)	Qualifications on entry	Number of children	Amount of paid work	Married/living with partner	Studied before OU	Withdrew from OU
Becky	25	G	2	0			
Polly	25	A	0	full time			X
Ann	28	D	1	2.5 days			X
Deb	29	F	2	1 day	X	X	
Hazel	30	F	0	full time		X	
Celia	31	D	3	part time			
Fiona	32	A	3	2.5 days	X		X
Sally	32	C	1	0		X	
Trish	32	C	2	16hrs			
Lee	33	E	1	full time	X	X	
Ruth	34	C	2	part time	X	X	
Kathy	34	G	0	full time	X		
Bev	36	A	5	0			X
Jane	36	C	2	0		X	X
Carol	37	C	1	full time			
Tina	37	D	1	3.5 days			
Fran	38	C	2	0			
Sue	38	A	3	0		X	X
Teresa	40	C	4	2.5 days			
Liz	40	D	1	full time	X		X
Gill	41	F	2	0	X	X	
Eve	41	D	2	part time	X	X	
Rachel	42	D	1	4 days	X		X
Pat	43	A	1	2.5 days	X	X	X
Paula	43	D	2	full time	X		
Barbara	43	D	0	full time			
Maggie	43	A	adults	full time			
Val	44	F	adults	part time	X		
Tammy	44	A	0	full time	X	X	
Viv	44	B	adults	part time	X	X	
Clare	45	C	1	part time	X		
June	45	G	adults	full time			
Kate	46	B	1	full time	X	X	
Diane	49	G	adults	0	X		
Sarah	51	G	adults	4 days	X	X	
Holly	53	C	adults	part time			X
Joan	57	F	adults	part time	X		

Qualifications key

A	none
B	CSE, other than grade 1
C	CSE, GCSE 4 or fewer subjects
D	GCSE, 5 or more subjects
E	1 A level
F	professional qualification A level equiv
G	2+ A levels

Pre and post test SEI subscale scores						
Psuedonym	**General**	**Social**	**Personal**	**Academic**	**Total**	**ISI %**
Ann pre	10	6	3	8	27	0
post	13	6	5	8	32	
Becky pre	2	3	2	2	9	35
post	6	4	1	7	18	53
Barbara	9	6	5	6	26	62
	13	6	6	9	34	76
Trish	12	8	3	5	28	36
	12	8	3	8	31	50
Sally	12	6	4	6	28	60
	15	7	7	4	33	69
Polly	13	4	2	4	23	71
	13	6	3	5	27	86
Kathy	11	6	1	3	21	0
	13	5	4	7	29	
Diane	12	8	7	6	33	57
	13	8	7	8	36	71
Clare	12	8	7	1	28	57
	15	8	5	7	35	71
Eve	6	3	0	1	10	43
	6	3	1	8	18	43
Fran	14	8	7	2	31	69
	16	8	6	8	38	76
Fiona	7	5	0	1	13	0
	9	5	0	6	20	
Deb	16	8	6	5	35	0
	14	8	6	8	36	
June	15	6	8	6	35	0
	15	8	8	6	37	
Gill	14	7	7	7	35	100
	15	6	8	9	38	100
Tina	14	7	4	7	32	63
	11	7	3	8	29	89
Jane	12	7	4	8	31	96
	12	5	5	8	30	98
Pat	14	7	6	1	28	62
	12	7	7	5	31	67
Paula	13	7	7	1	28	0
	13	5	6	7	31	
Ruth	7	4	2	3	16	52
	10	6	3	7	26	81
Sue	7	4	1	3	15	71
	9	4	1	5	19	71
Hazel	9	6	3	6	24	0
	14	7	5	9	35	
Lee	14	7	6	2	29	0
	14	7	5	8	34	
Liz	13	7	5	8	33	76
	14	8	6	7	35	76
Sarah	14	8	4	4	30	0
	14	8	6	4	32	

Psuedonym	General	Social	Personal	Academic	Total	ISI %
Teresa	16	8	4	9	37	35
	16	8	4	8	36	47
Maggie	14	6	6	1	27	57
	13	8	7	6	34	gained
Tammy	13	7	8	5	33	48
	15	7	7	7	36	62
Viv	7	6	2	8	23	43
	5	6	2	6	19	gained
Val	12	7	5	7	31	57
	15	6	6	8	35	gained
Kate	11	5	5	1	22	43
	9	7	5	8	29	gained

ISI: 0 = pre-test ISI not completed
gained = post-test ISI not completed, but participant stated she gained in confidence

Composition of self-esteem groups by age (years)

		SEI group	
Age	**Participant**	**pre-test**	**post-test**
25	Becky	VL	L
25	Polly	L	I
28	Ann	L	I
29	Deb	I	H
30	Hazel	L	I
32	Fiona	VL	L
32	Sally	I	I
32	Trish	I	I
33	Lee	I	I
34	Ruth	VL	L
34	Kathy	L	I
36	Jane	I	I
37	Tina	I	I
38	Sue	VL	L
38	Fran	I	H
40	Liz	I	I
40	Teresa	H	H
41	Eve	VL	L
41	Gill	I	H
42	Maggie	L	I
43	Barbara	L	I
43	Pat	I	I
43	Paula	I	I
44	Viv	L	L
44	Tammy	I	H
44	Val	I	I
45	Clare	I	I
45	June	I	H
46	Kate	L	I
49	Diane	I	H
51	Sarah	I	I

Key

VL	Very low
L	Low
I	Intermediate
H	High

Composition of self-esteem groups by PEQ

PEQ	Participant	SEI group	
		pre-test	post-test
A	Fiona	VL	L
A	Sue	VL	L
A	Maggie	L	I
A	Polly	L	I
A	Pat	I	I
A	Sally	I	I
A	Tammy	I	H
B	Kate	L	I
B	Viv	L	L
C	Ruth	VL	L
C	Clare	I	I
C	Fran	I	H
C	Jane	I	I
C	Trish	I	I
C	Teresa	H	H
D	Eve	VL	L
D	Ann	L	I
D	Barbara	L	I
D	Liz	I	I
D	Paula	I	I
D	Tina	I	I
E	Lee	I	I
F	Hazel	L	I
F	Deb	I	H
F	Gill	I	H
F	Val	I	I
G	Becky	VL	L
G	Kathy	L	I
G	Diane	I	H
G	June	I	H
G	Sarah	I	I

Key

VL	Very Low
L	Low
I	Intermediate
H	High

Pre-test	Post-test
Very Low	**Low**
Becky	Becky
Eve	Eve
Fiona	Fiona
Ruth	Ruth
Sue	Sue
	Viv
Low	**Intermediate**
Ann	Ann
Barbara	Barbara
Hazel	Clare
Kate	Hazel
Kathy	Jane
Maggie	Kate
Polly	Kathy
Viv	Lee
	Liz
Intermediate	Maggie
Clare	Pat
Deb	Paula
Diane	Polly
Fran	Sally
Gill	Sarah
Jane	Tina
June	Trish
Lee	Val
Liz	
Pat	
Paula	
Sally	
Sarah	
Tammy	
Tina	
Trish	
Val	
High	**High**
Teresa	Deb
	Diane
	Fran
	June
	Gill
	Tammy
	Teresa

Illustration of how June completed the pre-test Q sort

Least like me **Most like me**

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
33	39	29	8	14	16	4	1	7	2	3
34	47	30	15	20	23	32	6	9	10	5
53	51	31	19	21	45	35	11	13	12	17
55	52	38	24	26	50	37	18	36	22	44
	57	56	27	40	54	43	28	41	25	
			46	42	58	48	49			
					59					

Numbers in bold = score allocated to column, indicating continuum between 'Least like me' and 'Most like me'

Numbers in the boxes refer to the Q sample statements (see below)

Least like me/Strongly disagree

Position	Number	Statement
-5	33	I'm taking this course to keep up with my friends/partner
	34	I feel I am a failure
	53	What my partner thinks has a major impact on what I do
	55	I'm a disappointment to my parents
-4	39	I often felt like leaving school
	47	I am definitely lacking in initiative
	51	Other members of my family always seem to do better than me
	52	I want my friends to think what I do is worthwhile
	57	I worry the other students don't like me
-3	29	I often feel ashamed of myself
	30	Other people are generally more successful than me
	31	I feel uneasy much of the time without knowing why
	38	I'm doing this course so people will think better of me
	56	I'm concerned the tutor will think I'm not up to it
-2	8	At school, I usually gave up when the work was too hard
	15	There are many things I'd change about myself
	19	There are many people who dislike me
	24	At school, I was a failure
	27	It is difficult to express my views and feelings
	46	At school, the teachers thought I wasn't good enough
-1	14	I am easily depressed
	20	I am usually tense and anxious
	21	I am lacking in self confidence
	26	My feelings are easily hurt
	40	I am often upset about something
	42	I am more sensitive than most people
0	16	At school, I did as well as I wanted
	23	I often feel I am no good at all
	45	Passing this course will prove my worth to others
	50	I'm aiming to do well so my tutor won't think badly of me
	54	The approval of my family, colleagues and tutor is important

	58	Living up to others' expectations of me is hard
	59	Having a degree will increase my status in society
1	4	At school, I was satisfied with my work
	32	I'd like to be as happy as others appear to be
	35	At school, I liked it when the teachers asked me questions in class
	37	I find it difficult when meeting new people
	43	At school, I did the best I could
	48	I worry a lot
2	1	I have only a few friends
	6	I spend most of my free time alone
	11	Developing new skills is the whole point of studying
	18	I am as nice looking as most people
	28	I'm not worried about low marks so long as I learn from them
	49	I was proud of the work I did at school
3	7	I like being female
	9	Most people I know like me
	13	I am as important as most people
	36	People like my ideas
	41	Most people respect my views
4	2	I am happy most of the time
	10	I am usually successful when I attempt important tasks
	12	I am as intelligent as most people
	22	Completing this course will give me more confidence
	25	I am as strong and healthy as most people
5	3	I can do things as well as others
	5	Studying will help me realise my potential
	17	The personal challenge of studying is important
	44	I am as happy as most people

Most like me/Strongly agree

This participant herself placed the statements numbered 33, 34, 53 and 55 in the –5 Least like me column, and statements numbered 39, 47, 51, 52 and 57 in the –4, the next Least like me column. At the other end of the spectrum, she placed statements 3, 5, 17 and 44 in the +5, Most like me, column, and statements 2, 10, 12, 22 and 25 in the +4, next Most like me column. Statements in the column headed 0 are the ones about which she felt least strongly, or neutrally.

This particular student's perception at the pre-test that she could do things as well as others, was as happy as most people, and saw studying as a personal challenge and a means of achieving her potential (statements rated 5). In support of this (statements rated –5), June perceived herself *neither* to be a disappointment to her parents nor a failure. She was also not taking the course to keep up with others. In addition, her partner's views of her were not a major influence on what she did. However, at the time of the pre-test, June was recently divorced. This information was volunteered in the course of subsequent conversation and could not have been known from the sorting alone. This points to one shortcoming of this technique, that the whole picture cannot be uncovered with the Q sort statements alone.

Loadings rounded to 2 decimal places
Loadings in bold type are those that define factors

\Participant	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
June	**0.83**	0.15	0.26
Hazel	**0.79**	0.02	0.17
Diane	**0.76**	0.14	0.37
Sarah	**0.75**	0.17	0.23
Barbara	**0.75**	0.27	0.05
Teresa	**0.74**	0.05	0.20
Sally	**0.73**	0.35	0.23
Jane	**0.73**	-0.01	0.38
Liz	**0.72**	-0.12	0.26
Lee	**0.69**	0.03	0.39
Ann	**0.69**	0.44	0.18
Tammy	**0.67**	0.07	0.30
Val	**0.67**	-0.09	0.48
Gill	**0.60**	-0.09	0.42
Maggie	**0.60**	0.11	0.46
Sue	0.11	**0.80**	-0.15
Eve	-0.04	**0.67**	0.36
Polly	0.28	**0.61**	0.04
Fiona	-0.01	0.54	-0.08
Becky	-0.50	0.52	-0.06
Ruth	0.02	0.44	0.40
Clare	0.19	0.05	**0.77**
Pat	0.21	0.01	**0.76**
Paula	0.54	0.14	**0.70**
Fran	0.54	-0.16	0.59
Kate	0.32	0.08	0.56
Tina	0.49	0.06	0.52
Deb	0.59	-0.22	0.59
Trish	0.29	0.22	0.18
Viv	0.18	0.01	0.19
Kathy	0.49	0.41	0.44

Number in Factor columns denotes position for each Q sort item in the ideal representation of that factor e.g. For factor 1, item 1 would be allocated to the +1 column of the Q sort grid, near to the neutral (0) position; item 2 would be allocated to the +5 Most like me/Strongly agree position.

Pre-test factor arrays

Q sort item	1	2	3
1	1	3	-1
2	5	-1	5
3	5	0	2
4	1	-4	-4
5	3	3	3
6	0	5	-4
7	5	2	5
8	-3	-1	1
9	3	-1	3
10	4	1	4
11	4	3	2
12	4	1	4
13	3	-1	3
14	-3	4	-5
15	0	2	0
16	0	-3	-3
17	5	2	4
18	2	0	2
19	-4	-2	-4
20	-1	4	-4
21	-2	5	1
22	3	3	5
23	-4	0	-5
24	-5	-4	2
25	-5	-4	2
26	1	4	4
27	0	0	1
28	2	-3	-1
29	-4	-1	-5
30	-2	2	-1

Pre-test factor arrays

Q sort item	1	2	3
31	-2	2	-3
32	1	5	-1
33	-4	-5	-5
34	-5	-2	-3
35	-2	-5	-2
36	2	-2	1
37	0	4	-2
38	-2	-3	-2
39	-3	1	0
40	-1	5	-2
41	3	-4	2
42	1	4	2
43	2	-5	-4
44	4	-1	5
45	-2	1	0
46	-4	-4	3
47	-5	-3	-3
48	2	3	-2
49	2	-5	-3
50	-1	-3	0
51	-3	1	0
52	-1	1	0
53	0	-4	1
54	1	2	3
55	-5	0	0
56	-1	-2	1
57	-3	-2	0
58	0	0	-1
59	-1	0	1

Loadings rounded to 2 decimal places
Bold indicates the loadings that define factors

Participant	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Gill	**0.87**	0.10	0.11
Deb	**0.86**	-0.0	0.13
Hazel	**0.85**	0.09	0.30
Fran	**0.82**	0.08	0.26
Diane	**0.82**	0.08	0.28
June	**0.81**	-0.06	0.30
Liz	**0.80**	0.16	0.18
Val	**0.80**	0.02	0.32
Clare	**0.80**	0.20	0.21
Tammy	**0.78**	0.13	0.21
Sally	**0.77**	0.08	0.08
Lee	**0.77**	0.16	0.36
Tina	**0.76**	0.19	0.34
Maggie	**0.74**	-0.01	0.24
Jane	**0.73**	-0.01	0.37
Teresa	**0.73**	0.18	0.29
Sarah	**0.70**	0.06	0.03
Trish	**0.70**	0.2	-0.08
Barbara	**0.67**	0.09	0.47
Pat	**0.64**	0.14	0.42
Ann	**0.62**	0.20	0.55
Kate	0.54	0.45	0.14
Paula	0.52	0.31	0.45
Sue	0.01	**0.65**	0.17
Viv	0.08	**0.65**	-0.07
Ruth	0.31	**0.60**	-0.11
Fiona	0.03	**-0.69**	-0.20
Kathy	0.38	-0.01	**0.71**
Becky	0.13	0.24	**0.67**
Polly	0.36	-0.24	0.59
Eve	0.08	0.46	0.55

Number in Factor columns denotes position for each Q sort item in the ideal representation of that factor e.g. For factor 4, item 1 would be allocated to the 0 column of the Q sort grid, the neutral position; item 2 would be allocated to the +5 Most like me/Strongly agree position.

Post-test Factor arrays

Q sort item	4	5	6
1	0	1	3
2	5	-1	4
3	5	-1	3
4	2	-1	2
5	4	2	2
6	-1	4	0
7	5	5	5
8	-3	-5	-4
9	3	0	1
10	3	2	4
11	3	5	1
12	4	0	4
13	3	0	2
14	-4	0	3
15	-1	5	-4
16	1	-3	-3
17	5	3	4
18	2	-4	0
19	-4	-4	2
20	-2	4	0
21	-1	4	1
22	2	2	1
23	-5	-4	1
24	-5	-3	-5
25	4	-2	5
26	1	5	5
27	0	-2	3
28	2	-3	-4
29	-5	-5	0
30	-1	3	-3

Post test Factor arrays

Q sort item	4	5	6
31	-2	2	-1
32	0	2	-1
33	-4	-5	-3
34	-5	-4	-3
35	1	-4	-1
36	2	-2	-1
37	-1	3	1
38	0	-2	-2
39	-2	3	-5
40	-1	2	0
41	3	-3	-1
42	0	0	5
43	2	1	-2
44	4	-1	3
45	-2	-2	-3
46	-3	-3	-4
47	-4	-2	-1
48	0	3	4
49	4	-1	2
50	-2	0	-5
51	-3	0	-2
52	1	-1	2
53	1	1	2
54	1	4	0
55	-4	-5	-2
56	-3	4	-4
57	-3	1	-5
58	-2	1	0
59	0	1	-2